Marked "Cancelled"

NATALIE SUMNER LINCOLN

Marked "Cancelled"

BY

NATALIE SUMNER LINCOLN

D. Appleton and Company
NEW YORK 1930 LONDON

COPYRIGHT, 1930, BY

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission of the publisher.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To

JOHN HARRISON DAVIS

As half in shade and half in sun,
This World along its path advances,
May that side the sun's upon
Be all that ever meets your glances.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	AT THE HOUR APPOINTED	1
II.	THE DEATH CHAMBER	5
III.	THE SIGNET RING	17
IV.	THE BLOODSTAINED PAPER	32
V.	A DRAMATIC INTERRUPTION	46
VI.	FACTS AND FANCIES	58
VII.	A REFUSAL OF MARRIAGE	74
VIII.	THE ALIBIS	87
IX.	THE PAINTED LADY	100
X.	IN STUDIO HOUSE	115
XI.	UNDER THE EAVES	130
XII.	BLIND TRAILS	143
XIII.	THE CORONER'S INQUEST	154
XIV.	ENTANGLING EVIDENCE	168
XV.	THE VERDICT	182
XVI.	COMPLICATIONS	195
XVII.	A MATTER OF NO IMPORTANCE	208
XVIII.	THE SPIDER AND THE FLY	222
XIX.	SILHOUETTES	237
XX.	A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE	253
XXI.	TRAPPED	261
XXII.	RETRIBUTION	278

CHAPTER I

At the Hour Appointed

A STUMBLE, a muttered apology, and the man in the black and gray sweater, with whom I had accidentally collided, shot into a compartment of the revolving door just ahead of me. As I stepped inside also, the revolving partition at my back thumped against my shoulders and propelled me forward so that I reached the outer steps of the apartment house with accelerated speed. I was in time to see the sweater-clad figure swing with equal haste along the street to my right. Then, dismissing him from my mind, I faced eastward.

It was a scant fifty feet from the apartment entrance to my destination and, with a minute or two to spare, I loitered by the wall which inclosed the garden, separating the towering walls of the place I had just left and the property owned by Alfred Reade, of which it was a part. Other residences in that once fashionable street had given place to business structures, and the old brick house, with its colonial doorway of generous proportions, looked squatty and unreal—an ancient misfit untouched by the hand of financial progress.

And the garden, while equally out of place in its present surroundings with its budding shrubbery and

spring flowers, held a lingering charm difficult to define. Perhaps it was the delicate scent of the magnolias and cherry blossoms which brought back memories best forgotten. At any rate, it was with a feeling of relief that I mounted the three white steps leading to the colonial door and pressed the button of the electric bell. A second and even a third pressure was needed before I heard some one fumbling with the latch, and I laid my hand on the brass door knob with the instinctive desire to speed its opening. To be late in keeping an appointment with Alfred Reade, multimillionaire and oil magnate, was an unpardonable offense in his eyes—or so I had been informed by those who knew him intimately before he took up his residence in the city of Washington, the nation's capital.

The wide door swung inward on its oiled hinges, given added impetus by the pressure of my hand, and I stepped inside, only to be stopped at the threshold by a young girl.

"What do you here?" she demanded, and I noticed first her distinctly foreign accent and secondly, the exceptional pallor of her lovely face. She was obviously not a servant.

"I wish to see Mr. Reade," and as she still appeared dubious, I showed her my appointment card. At sight of the writing it bore, her face cleared. Stepping to one side, she admitted me into the hall, closed the door and led the way into a small room on the left, furnished as a waiting room or secretary's office.

"I have myself just come," the girl at my side ex-

plained. My glance followed hers to a hat and coat tossed across a chair. "It is early"—a certain nervousness crept into her voice, banished, however, at sight of an open ledger spread across the flat-top desk near the window. "Ah, Mr. Reade has made ready for your call. Come, sir, it is the rule to sign within this book."

Somewhat mystified, I crossed to her side and stared down at the pages exposed, blank except for the single entry—

8:30 A.M.—Mr. Guy Burton—important.

A penciled line zigzagged down the page; evidently I was the only caller expected, during the morning hours at least. Without comment I accepted the pen she proffered and scrawled my name in the space indicated and stepped back from the desk. In so doing, my foot struck a small metal object and rolled it toward her; before I could see what it was, she had picked it up.

"This way"—and giving me no time to sit down, had I so wished, the girl headed for a door. Holding it open, she pronounced my name in tones loud enough to reach a man in a chair toward the farther end of the long room.

Thus announced, I advanced, only to halt in some uncertainty midway between the door and the man in the chair; he had, neither by word nor motion, betrayed knowledge of my presence. The young girl by the door also noticed something wrong in my reception and, disturbed, came forward.

"Mr. Reade!" Twice she repeated his name, then went on down the room—to recoil, a second later, against me as I approached. "See! See!" And with one hand clutching my arm, she pointed ahead with the other.

Seated in a chair near the wall was a man, his head tilted backward, while from a wound in his forehead blood trickled over his face and down upon his chest. I touched his hand—its icy chill sent the blood back to my own heart.

"Good God, he's dead!" I spoke to an empty room —my companion had fled.

CHAPTER II

The Death Chamber

IN horror, I stared down at Reade, then again scanned the room; we, the quick and the dead, had it to ourselves. There was another door other than the one through which I had entered, and I tore over to it, only to find that it opened into a closet, filled with odds and ends—but no human being. I tested the windows; they were locked on the inside.

Back once more in the secretary's office, I looked around for the young girl who had admitted me; she was neither there nor in the hall. In sheer bewilderment, I stood for a second or two by the front door, trying to collect my ideas. Should I continue my search in the upper part of the house? At the thought I moved toward the staircase, only to pause irresolutely in the center of the hall. Would not the terrified girl bolt out of the house rather than upstairs? Judging from her statements she did not reside there. But some one must; it seemed unlikely that a man of Reade's social standing and his wealth would live alone. But if the house were inhabited by some person or persons other than the dead man, where were they?

Returning to the front door, I swung it open. What more likely than that the girl had gone for assistance!

The soft breeze of the April morning fanned my face as I hesitated in the outer vestibule, one hand preventing the door from latching behind me. The vehicular traffic had reached its peak and the pedestrians, too, were passing in a steady stream en route to the great Government departments not so many blocks away. If the girl had left the house via the front door, she was long since swallowed from view in the moving crowd.

The Reade property, flanked by office buildings on the east and the apartment house on the west, was midway in the block, and while I could see the traffic officer at the distant street intersection, he was beyond my hail. Stepping back inside the house, I closed the door and retreated to the secretary's office, the telephone there, my objective. By the cradle phone on the desk lay the telephone directory. Running through its well-thumbed pages, it took only a second or two to locate the number wanted, but more time was consumed explaining to first one official and then another at Police Headquarters the reason and urgency of my call.

I put back the telephone and glanced about. The room, octagonal in shape, was relatively small in contrast to the massive mahogany flat-top desk, the filing cases which lined one wall, three leather upholstered chairs, a big divan similarly covered, and a typewriter table placed under a broad window so that the light from it would fall over the typist's left shoulder. Light, did I say? I meant only such light as filtered through

the opaque window glass and the blue-black Holland shade, partly concealed by the sash curtains and over-drapes of some dark material. It was not a cheerful room, or else its close connection with the one beyond where, from my seat, I could see the figure of the dead man through the communicating doorway, lent to the place a chill impossible to describe.

My roving gaze fell on the ladder-back chair nearest the hall door; upon it still lay the hat and coat of the missing secretary. Was it likely she had left the house, bareheaded? Or was it not more probable that she had sought aid on the floors above? If so, ample time had elapsed for that aid to be forthcoming.

Once again I hurried into the reception hall, but this time my objective was neither the front door nor the circular staircase which wound its graceful way to the top floor, judging from the ornamental skylight far above my head. Through a doorway under the stairs, I glimpsed a narrow hall leading to what must be the back of the house, and started down it; a door farther along and to my right stood open and I caught sight of a porcelain washstand in the small lavatory as I peered inside to make sure that the room was uninhabited.

Another door next to the lavatory was closed, and a turn of the knob proved that it was locked. I rapped smartly on the panels and waited an appreciable second for some response—none came. Still more perplexed I hurried along, and with no gentle touch swung open the door at the end of the hall. The kitchen, into which

it gave admittance, was empty. I made no attempt to enter the place, preferring to stay where I could keep an eye on the front entrance—in fact, my progress down the hall had been made with constant glances backward to make certain no one approached the front door, always plainly visible, without my knowledge.

A gong just over my head sounded loudly and sent the blood pounding through my veins. There were tiny drops of moisture on my forehead as I answered its imperative summons. The solemn silence of the house, its enveloping atmosphere of transcending horror, had stirred me to the depths.

"Well?" The heavier of the two men confronting me in the vestibule put the question roughly as they slid inside the front door which I held invitingly open. After them came three blue-coated policemen. "What's wrong here?" His thumb hooked in the armpit of his left sleeve, dragging back his coat, and I caught sight of the metal badge displayed thereby. The policemen, at a signal, took stations at the base of the steps and the front door, while one went toward the back of the house.

"This way." Not stopping to be questioned further, I motioned them to accompany me through the secretary's office and into the room beyond.

A whistling intake of breath caused me to glance toward the man at my elbow. With eyes shining, like some animal contemplating its prey, and face gray-white, he stood staring at Alfred Reade; then his gaze swept the room, to return, as if drawn by a magnet,

to the dead man. With a tread which even my keen hearing failed to detect, he slipped across the intervening space and bent over Reade.

"You stay here." The admonition, couched in tones none too friendly, came from the detective who had first addressed me, and my intention of continuing my search for the missing secretary was nipped in the bud. While still conscious of the detective's nearness, I watched, with an interest that quickened with the passing seconds, the other man's investigations.

It was a weird and ghastly scene that confronted us. Sitting slumped back in his chair, all that was mortal of Alfred Reade faced the huge stone fireplace. His skull had been pierced directly between the eyes by a bullet, and from the hole, blood still oozed, dripping from his face to his pajama-clad figure and from there to the handsome oriental rug, one of three which covered the floor of the large room. Clutched in the fingers of his right hand, which trailed limply over the side of Reade's chair, was an open sheet of paper. The side turned outward was devoid of writing; at least, from my position I could see none. Unwittingly I took a step nearer and then paused in some uncertainty—the man crouching before Reade had turned at my approach and I encountered his piercing and unfriendly gaze.

"Just a minute." His softly spoken words broke the spell and I again glanced back at the sheet of paper; it was blank, save where a drop of blood had touched the edge, forming a thin, zigzag crimson line.

"Did you give the correct address to the coroner, Wilson?"

"I sure did, Inspector." The man addressed reached for the telephone on the glass-covered mahogany table. "I'll call him again."

"No, don't." Still on hands and knees, the inspector looked again at me, ignoring his companion's mumbled protest. "My name is Warfield, chief of the Homicide Squad, and this is my assistant, Detective Wilson." The stout man acknowledged the introduction with a noncommittal grunt.

"And I am Burton—Guy Burton of Humble, Texas . . ." I would have added more but was given no opportunity.

"You notified Headquarters of finding Reade here, dead?" I nodded affirmatively. "Did you use that phone?" His pointing finger indicated the instrument within easy reach of my hand.

"No, the one in the secretary's office, beyond." Warfield's quiet tones lessened the tension somewhat. "To tell you the truth, I never noticed this phone here, my attention being somewhat centered on *that*"—and my gaze shifted to Reade. "I haven't got over the shock."

"Were you old friends?"

"I never saw him before this morning." My vehement reply drew a sharp look from Warfield. "My appointment was made by letter, two weeks ago, and I got here on the dot."

"And what exactly was the 'dot'?" questioned Warfield swiftly.

"Thirty minutes after eight. That clock"—I wheeled around and indicated the old clock in the opposite corner—"was just chiming the half hour as I came into this room."

"So you are not a Washingtonian." Warfield's comment was not put with questioning emphasis and I made no reply; instead, my eyes followed his every movement. His fingers hovered for an instant over an empty cartridge shell lying on the rug close by Reade's feet. Without touching it, however, he rose, and stepping closer to the dead man, looked down at him.

I had seen gruesome sights on the battlefields of France in 1918, but Reade's bloodstained, powder-marked countenance shook my nerve and I breathed more easily when Warfield's lifted finger diverted my thoughts.

"See here"—he almost touched the back of the chair —"the bullet clipped off some of the upholstery"—he broke off to peer around the chair. When he backed away from it and across the room, I was close at his side. With painstaking care, but swiftly withal, he examined the paneled walls behind the seated figure. Suddenly a low exclamation broke from him and he pocketed his tape measure and magnifying glass.

"The bullet is embedded here; dig it out, Wilson." And, obedient to his call, the detective came from the closet I had looked into already and joined us. But Warfield, having traced the bullet, apparently lost interest in it for the time being. Turning his back on

his assistant he examined first one window and then the other—all looked out on the inclosed garden which separated the old mansion from the modern apartment house a hundred feet away.

"I found them locked like that," I volunteered, as Warfield completed his examination. "Locked on the inside."

"And doubly protected by the iron grill outside each window," remarked the inspector thoughtfully. "No, don't touch anything now, Mr. Burton; the finger-print expert will be here shortly and . . ." His words were cut short by Wilson bustling forward.

"Here's the bullet," the latter announced. "It wasn't buried so deep, neither." He displayed the flattened piece of lead in his handkerchief-covered palm.

Warfield studied the bullet; then returning to Reade, he stooped down and through his magnifying glass examined the empty shell. Suddenly he stood upright.

"Let's have a look at your gun, Mr. Burton," and neither his tone nor his outstretched hand invited a refusal, had I been so inclined. With a swiftness which eclipsed Wilson's dart toward me, I drew the automatic from my hip pocket and extended it, butt foremost, to the inspector. In silence he took the automatic, removed the cartridges and counted them aloud: "One, two, three, four, five, six . . . seven." He paused to eye me reflectively, then, replacing the cartridges in the clip, pushed it back inside the pistol butt.

"A .45 caliber automatic," he commented quietly;

"an unusual plaything to carry through city streets, and one liable to put you behind prison bars, Mr. Burton."

My lips compressed as, ignoring my extended hand, he slipped the pistol into his own pocket.

"The gun is fully loaded," I pointed out, successfully keeping all feeling out of my voice, "and carried by me for the better protection of"—our gazes crossed, held—"of Mr. Reade's property."

"What d'ye mean?" The question shot from Wilson, but I continued to regard Warfield, whose stare had grown intensified. The pause was noticeable. Then I slipped my hand inside my coat, my fingers fumbled with a strap and buckle, but when I withdrew them, they clutched a small leather money pouch which I had worn strapped to me.

"Ten thousand dollars in U. S. Treasury bills." I opened the pouch and displayed the bills of varying denominations. "Do you wish to count them, Inspector?"

A faint color stained Warfield's parchmentlike skin. He made no motion to take the money.

"Later; now I'll listen to your explanation." His level tones deepened, holding a threatening note—or so it seemed to me. "Make it snappy."

But I did not hurry; instead, I contemplated Warfield warily. I had "toted" a gun too often to carry it self-consciously, but the inspector had detected it while seemingly occupied with other things. I cleared my throat; it had grown dry.

"Some thirty miles west of Humble there's a wild

tract of land which Alfred Reade owned—or did own," I amended, my eyes straying to the chair and its ghastly burden. "He's tried for years to find a purchaser. I'm only one of many agents who have handled the property. Last month I was able to make a deal, and came here to see Mr. Reade to-day and close the transaction."

"Bringing cash instead of a certified check." Warfield's voice betrayed incredulity.

"Because Reade stipulated that it had to be cash." I shrugged. "Perhaps it was done to keep up his reputation for eccentricity, from which, I understand, he got a great kick."

"Perhaps so," agreed Warfield, with sudden amiability. "Let me look at those bills, Mr. Burton; it's seldom I see so much money at one time." He made no attempt to touch the certificates, but, as I let them run slowly through my fingers, I discovered he had drawn out a pencil and notebook and was jotting down the serial numbers on the different denominations. "So much money," he repeated a second or two later as I again secreted the pouch, strapping it back in place, "to give for a wild tract in Texas."

"Not when it's rumored oil has been discovered on it," I replied, and Warfield caught me up instantly.

"In that case why did Reade wish to dispose of this property?"

"Another act of eccentricity on his part," I retorted, and seeing the inspector's skeptical smile, "on a piece with Reade living in this place alone."

"Ah, but did he?"

A gesture expressed my feelings. "I could locate no one here."

"Did Reade admit you?"

"No." I was becoming exasperated with the continuous questioning. Was Warfield going to allow the pitiful object in the chair to remain there indefinitely? "As I told you on the phone—"

"You did not speak to me on the phone, Mr. Burton," retorted the inspector with some show of heat. "Who admitted you to this house?"

"A young girl, whom I took to be Reade's secretary."

"Where is she?"

"That's what I wish to know. She came in here with me; we went close to Reade; I bent over him—and when I looked around she had vanished."

The two men regarded me in silence; then Wilson turned toward the secretary's office.

"Which door did she leave by—that?" pointing to the one through which we had entered, "or that?" And following him to the side of the room, I observed a door opening into the garden. Its thick panels duplicated the woodwork of the entire walls, and it was not strange that, in my hasty examination of the room, I had mistaken the square stained glass toward the top of the door, and covered by handsome grillwork, for a small window set higher in the wall than the others.

"I cannot answer your question, Wilson," I admitted, after a brief pause. "She bolted away when

my back was turned, but I heard no sound of a closing door."

"And this door is fastened securely on the inside by an old-fashioned, wrought-iron latch, as well as a modern Yale lock," commented Warfield. He lifted the latch, gingerly, his handkerchief protecting it from finger marks, and opened the door. I had but slight opportunity to judge the beauty of the garden, for he closed it immediately, as one of the blue-coated policemen joined us.

"We've searched the house from cellar to garret, Inspector," the man reported, "and there's not a soul in it save ourselves."

Warfield regarded the policeman blankly; then nodded his thanks.

"Stay here, Smith," he directed, "while I try and locate Coroner Clark. Touch nothing and see that nothing is disturbed." He paused on his way to the secretary's office and eyed Wilson sharply. "What's the matter?"

A negro boy, evading the clutch of another policeman in the doorway, darted into the room and ran up to Warfield.

"Say, Boss, de young ma'am whut work hyar"—his black eyes rolled alarmingly in their sockets—"she's ovah yondah in our office, Doctuh Wyant's office, layin' on de flo' lak a daid pusson."

CHAPTER III

The Signet Ring

INSPECTOR WARFIELD considered the excited office boy.

"Where does Dr. Wyant live?" he asked, and the negro pointed in the direction of the garden.

"In de department next do'," he explained. My sudden start went unnoticed in the excitement his words created. "Come quick; de doctah's out an' she's bad off."

As we reached the secretary's office, a pompous little man bustled through the front door and over to us, but his obvious desire to go at once into the farther room, where Sergeant Wilson and Smith stood guard, was checked by Warfield.

"Later," and as the coroner manifested his surprise with a dubious glance at the inspector, the latter added: "Reade is dead, but this boy tells me that one of his employees is in Dr. Wyant's office next door in immediate need of a physician's care. Sergeant Wilson will see that nothing here is disturbed until our return." He broke off to exchange a word with a police officer, whom I later found was Sergeant Meade, of the Bureau of Identification at Police Headquarters, who entered at that moment, followed by several assistants carrying cameras.

Not waiting for the whispered colloquy to end, I made for the front door, but my quiet departure was punctuated by a hail from Warfield, who gained my side as I continued down the steps to the pavement.

"What is your hurry, Mr. Burton?" Warfield's question was followed by a strong grip on my arm. I had not thought his long, slender fingers possessed such strength. I shrugged.

"My mission is ended—"

"But not fully explained," he interrupted smoothly; "and you carry too much wealth about your person to go unprotected through the streets of Washington."

"Why not return my gun?"

Warfield's smile was enigmatic; it was the only response I received. He did not slacken his hold on my arm nor check his rapid stride toward the apartment house I had left so short a time before; in fact, Dr. Clark, puffing along in our wake, had some difficulty in keeping up with us. Led by the negro, we hurried through the revolving door, Warfield crowding into the same space I occupied, and inside the foyer of the apartment house we continued our arm-in-arm progress to a door toward the rear of the broad corridor. The boy was the first into Dr. Wyant's reception room. It did not need his pointed finger to locate the prone figure on the floor.

Dr. Clark, his professional instincts aroused, was the first to reach the girl's side and my hastily formed opinion of him altered—to his advantage.

"Don't raise her head," he cautioned as Warfield

proffered his aid. "Some cold water, quick." The office boy jostled into me as I started instinctively to get it. Realizing that he was familiar with the location of objects, and I was not, I halted and turned my attention to one of the windows. The stuffy atmosphere of the room was the second thing I had noticed on our entry.

It took me a minute to solve the somewhat intricate catch and to push up the window; a stiff breeze parted the over-drapes and whirled away some loose papers on a table near by, carrying them over to the unconscious girl. Dr. Clark looked up as I came near.

"Stand back and give us air," he directed; "don't crowd about."

Somewhat abashed, I retreated toward the window and from there watched Warfield chafe her wrists while Clark dipped his handkerchief in the basin of water which the negro put by his side, splashing part of the contents as he ran in from the inner office. Deftly, the physician wrung out the handkerchief and laid it on the girl's temples; three, four, five times he repeated the operation. Then, as her eyelids fluttered and her lips parted, he took from his surgical bag a small phial and poured some of its contents into a measuring glass.

"Sip this," he coaxed, pressing the glass to her lips as he pillowed her head against his arm. "Try—that's fine; now—another swallow."

Slowly she came back to consciousness and, as the light of reason returned, her glance roved about the

room and finally rested on me. With a sudden choking cry she drew herself upright and then collapsed into the nearest chair, giving way to wild and ungovernable weeping. Warfield missed nothing of the little drama. Leaving the girl to Clark's ministrations, he crossed the room.

"Who's your friend?" he asked, under his breath.

I shook my head. "Save that she admitted me when I rang Reade's doorbell, I know nothing about her."

"So she's the girl who skipped off?" Warfield turned and stared at her, then, taking me by the elbow, he guided me into the inner office, at the same time beckoning to the negro boy to follow us.

"What's your name?" he asked the latter, taking the precaution to close the communicating door, that our conversation might not disturb Dr. Clark and his patient.

"Sylvester, sir."

"Well, Sylvester, who's the young lady in the next room?"

Sylvester scratched a woolly pate. "I dunno, 'cept she's Miss Claire to Doctuh Wyant an' Mistuh Joe; ain' neither one of 'em hyar jes' now. She done cum bustin' in hyar 'bout a half hour or mo' ago."

"Then why didn't you come for us sooner?"

"'Cause when she done foun' de doctah was out, she dropped down in a chair as I started cleanin' in hyar. She said she'd jes' set awhile. I noticed she was kind of peaked-like," went on Sylvester who, now that responsibility was taken from his shoulders, appeared to

thrive under Warfield's notice. His chest expanded several inches and his eyes rolled in anticipation of further sensations. "By an' by Miss Claire done let out a screech an' flopped on de flo'. Scared me mos' white, she did." At the agitating thought, perspiration trickled down Sylvester's black face. "An' when I tried to put her on de chair agin, she drapped back limp and daid-like, an' I thought Mistuh Reade bettah know 'bout it all. I calc'lated"—with a knowing grin —"Miss Claire done cum fum dar, since she wasn't wearin' no hat."

Warfield weighed Sylvester's remarks carefully. "You know where she works, though you don't know her full name," he commented dryly. "Think again, boy."

The negro's thick lips took on an obstinate curve. "Why should'n' I know whar' Miss Claire works?" he demanded. "Ain' I often see her cum out in de garden dar an' join Mistuh Joe." He ran over to the open window and showed us the garden belonging to the Reade mansion. Its graveled walks and sheltered nooks looked an inviting retreat from the dusty street just visible over the vine-covered wall. "An' how cum she be ovah to Mistuh Reade's ef she didn' b'long dar?"

For the moment, it proved an unanswerable argument and Warfield changed the subject.

"When will Dr. Wyant return?" he asked, and laid one hand on the door preparatory to joining Clark in the waiting room.

"When he done finish callin' on de patients." Sylvester wiped some dust from the center table by which stood a revolving chair. "De doctuh don' hab no mornin' office hours; not 'til noon, noway," he amended hastily. "But Mistuh Joe cum in early, some week days."

"Ah, his son?"

"No, sah; he's Mistuh Reade's nephew"—Sylvester clipped his words together—"de rich gemman whut libs yondah." A jerk of his thumb indicated the mansion across the garden. At his words, Warfield's head tipped upward and his thin nostrils quivered, reminding me of a favorite pointer in a field trial.

My regard shifted to Sylvester and I wondered if his sudden desire to end the conversation was as evident to the inspector as it was to me. He had sidled forward and with a dexterous twist squeezed his small person into the narrow space which Warfield had created by the slow opening of the communicating door. But Sylvester's attempt to be the first into the waiting room was blocked by Clark backing toward us. My eyes traveled over the head of the negro boy and the coroner's short figure to the latter's patient sitting upright on the day bed which had been pulled out into the room.

"Why come here?" she demanded, and I realized that she addressed me, ignoring the others. She met my gaze unswervingly and there was that in her look which compelled an answer.

"I came to find you." I spoke haltingly and the sound

of my husky tones surprised me in the stillness. Uneasily conscious of Warfield's keen scrutiny, I found myself approaching the young girl through a path cleared of office boy and coroner as the inspector shouldered them unceremoniously to one side.

"And why me?" As the girl put the question I paused at the foot of the day bed. She sat near the window and the morning sun beat upon her, disclosing the havoc wrought by tears. I had thought her pallid when she admitted me into the Reade mansion; ashen, she was now. Her eyes, shaded by long lashes, gleamed up at me, sparkling as with fever, while one trembling hand played with her short, disheveled hair. "And why me?"

The question this time was put with force. My gaze shifted from her face to her pongee gown, a simple affair, piped with some red material. Startled, I looked upward—the red piping was an unpleasant reminder of the sinister marks on Alfred Reade's pajamas.

"Why did you run away?" I demanded in my turn, annoyed by her persistent stare.

"To get help from Dr. Wyant for"—she faltered—"for Mr. Reade; he—he appeared ill."

"Dead, you mean." Warfield broke into the conversation and the girl started perceptibly. "Dead—shot dead."

She threw up her arm as if to ward off a blow and thereby shielded her face from us.

"Dead," repeated Warfield, coming closer, "when

you ushered this gentleman," laying his hand on my shoulder, "into Reade's presence; and you in his house —alone, with the dead man!"

"Please, please!" She dropped her arm and raised pleading, piteous eyes. "Say no more. I—I cannot bear it!" Her voice rose, carrying an unmistakable note of hysteria and Dr. Clark, unperceived by his patient, raised a warning finger.

There was a second's pause. My eyes swept the room, a pleasant enough place, well furnished for a doctor's outer office and large enough to accommodate a dozen people when the furniture was pushed into some semblance of order; now it seemed overcrowded with chairs and tables huddled forward, the day bed away from its corner and we three men and the negro boy occupying most of the center space. The two windows, forming an alcove to the left of the entrance, opened upon a wide courtyard.

Warfield was still regarding the girl, his expression one of dubious concern, when I again turned my attention to the little group. With a frown, almost a scowl, the coroner silenced his evident desire to resume his inquisitorial methods.

"Tell us who you are, my dear," he coaxed, putting back in his bag a bottle of ammonia salts. "My friend, here, Mr. Warfield"—with obvious intent he omitted the use of the inspector's title—"and I simply wish to assist you in this, eh, situation."

The girl favored him with a grateful look. "Claire Fechet is my name," she explained, and the foreign

accent I had previously noticed grew more pronounced. Coroner Clark caught it also.

"Ah—and your nationality?"

"American." For the first time she brightened. "My father was for fifteen years American consul at Nice; I grew up there and in French convents. This is my first trip to America since I was two years of age. My acquaintances here smile at my English—it is sometimes difficult of expression, although my father insisted that I speak it always at home."

"And your father came here with you?"

She shook her head and tears, very near the surface, filled her tragic eyes. "He died eight months ago and I came to America, as you say it—on my own."

"And made your home with Mr. Alfred Reade?" questioned Clark; he had locked and strapped his bag, ready to leave, but at Claire's decided shake of the head, he paused.

"Then how came you in his house, this morning?" asked Warfield; he had taken a hint from Coroner Clark and his manner, too, was conciliatory. For an instant Claire hesitated, but for an instant only.

"I am Mr. Reade's secretary," she began, while her fingers fumbled with the damp handkerchief lying in her lap. "He asked that I be there early this morning and so I—I"—she stumbled in her speech—"I accepted a key to the front door, belonging to Mrs. Grymes, his housekeeper."

"His housekeeper?" echoed Warfield; "then Mr. Reade did not live alone?"

Claire eyed him in manifest surprise. "But no," she responded. "Mrs. Grymes and her husband had the third floor. That is, I so understood." Two reddish spots appeared on each white cheek, intensifying her pallor. "I have never been above the second floor."

There was a brief silence while the coroner and Warfield considered her statement. Sylvester, apparently losing interest in the scene, ducked silently through the communicating door and I could hear him pursuing his window washing.

"If Mr. and Mrs. Grymes lived with Reade, why was it necessary to give you a key to enter the house?" inquired Warfield suddenly, and I forgot Sylvester in my eagerness to hear her reply. "Could not one of them have let you in?"

"Mrs. Grymes left yesterday to open Mr. Reade's country place." Claire Fechet twisted about restlessly and got to her feet.

"One moment." Warfield detained her by the simple method of stepping between her and the door. "Where was Grymes?"

She shrugged. "He brought the key to me last night; more than that I cannot tell you."

The inspector stared hard at Claire, then stepped to one side.

"Do you feel strong enough to return to the Reade mansion?" he asked, and offered his arm to escort her from the apartment.

Claire hung back. "Must I go there?" she asked, addressing the coroner through trembling lips.

Clark and Warfield exchanged glances. "It might be as well," the former agreed, and with lagging footsteps and a last lingering backward glance, she went with them into the outer corridor. But once outside Wyant's apartment, Warfield seemed content to allow Coroner Clark to go with Claire to the front of the building and I found him at my elbow as I stopped at the elevator shaft.

"Not so fast," he cautioned, and I was aware of an angry gleam in his eyes. "Where are you off to?"

"My quarters are on the next floor," I responded blandly and had the satisfaction of knowing by his quick intake of breath that I had surprised him.

"You are staying here?" I nodded. "And why not at a hotel?"

"A matter of economy," ironically. My sense of humor mastered my annoyance. "I am occupying my brother-in-law's apartment in his absence from Washington. Will you come upstairs with me?"

"Not now." The inspector's refusal was spoken brusquely; possibly he sensed my lack of cordiality, although I tried to simulate a hospitality I did not feel; I badly needed to be by myself, to consider the happenings of the morning rationally and free from bias. To walk in upon a man murdered under circumstances which might involve me, a stranger in the city, was a condition of affairs anything but reassuring.

"To be quite frank, Mr. Burton," went on Warfield, lowering his voice so as not to be overheard by others passing along the corridor, "I prefer to have you

accompany me for the present." His quiet tone conveyed a meaning I was not slow to grasp. "Come, we are losing time," and, taking my consent for granted, he laid a persuasive hand on my shoulder.

The telephone switchboard was in a small room at the front of the building and the operator there looked up at our approach.

"No, sir. Mr. Joseph Reade hasn't an apartment here," she said, in reply to Inspector Warfield's question. "But he has been staying with Dr. Wyant—at least his mail is left in the doctor's box."

"I see." Warfield stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Can you reach him for me?"

She shook her head. "No, sir; I have no idea where he is now."

"Then when he comes in, please inform Mr. Reade that he is needed immediately at his uncle's residence."

The girl jotted down the message on her scratch pad, paused and looked up at me. "Mr. Burton?" And as I nodded affirmatively: "I thought so. The night operator told me when she went off duty that you had arrived. I have here an extra key to your apartment which Senator Martin left with me, and this note from your sister."

I accepted both with a word of thanks as the girl removed them from her desk drawer, but I had no time to open the envelope which bore my name in Marian Martin's familiar penmanship, for Warfield, a peculiar expression on his face, addressed me hastily as we walked down the steps of the apartment house.

"Is Senator Martin of Texas your brother-in-law?" he demanded.

"Yes."

Warfield stopped and glanced at me reproachfully. "Why didn't you mention that fact?" he asked. "Some years ago the Senator placed the Metcalf jewel disappearance in my hands and later, when I had joined the Metropolitan Police, his recommendation gained me promotion. It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Burton."

I considered the pleasure, up to then, had been somewhat misplaced, but keeping that thought to myself, I accepted his advances with alacrity. The appearance of a blue-coated policeman on the Reade doorstep perhaps accounted for the small crowd collected about the entrance to the mansion, or else it was the sixth sense that spreads the news of some unusual or tragic happening among human beings. The inspector was recognized by several of the loiterers and a buzz of comment followed us as we disappeared inside the open door.

After a whispered word or two with the plain-clothes detective who at that second descended the circular staircase, Warfield went at once into the secretary's office and I followed him there. Sitting curled up in a big chair by the flat-top desk was Claire Fechet, with her head pillowed on her arm. She appeared so alone, so utterly forlorn, that I halted involuntarily and then stood tongue-tied. What was there for me to say?

"Why not go upstairs, Miss Fechet?" suggested

Warfield softly. "Surely you can find a couch or bed to rest on more comfortably."

She shivered, whether from cold, for no sunshine penetrated the windows and warmed the chilly atmosphere inside, or from a natural distaste to being alone on the second floor, I could not say. But whatever protest was forming on her parted lips went unspoken as Coroner Clark reappeared, coming from the next room. He made no motion to close the door and I caught sight of Alfred Reade's lifeless figure in the flash light from the camera man's apparatus as they photographed the scene. The unexpected explosion brought Claire to her feet with a piercing scream.

"There, there, it's all over." The coroner patted her arm soothingly. "Tell us at what time you reached here this morning?"

"Just before—this—gentleman—came." She spoke haltingly, struggling gamely to recover from her fright. "Oh, not five minutes before; I had but just removed my hat and coat when he rang"—she pointed to the chair where lay her articles of attire—"and not stopping to hang them in the closet, I went at once to answer the front door."

"You did not talk with Mr. Reade before Mr. Burton's arrival?"

"No."

"Nor hear him moving about?"

"Oh, no." She shrank back.

"Nor see any one else here?" persisted the coroner, drawing closer.

"Nor see any one," she repeated, and her tones were parrotlike.

"Nor find any indication that some one, other than Mr. Reade, had been in here this morning?" demanded Warfield. The girl's left hand clung tenaciously to the arm of her chair and she straightened up. For a long minute she regarded her inquisitor.

"I found nothing, save this ring, which Mr. Burton saw me pick up and which I dropped here." She stopped and extended her right hand almost under my nose and I saw a handsome gold signet ring on her third finger. "My father's ring," she explained, her rich contralto voice laden with pathos, "and my most prized possession."

CHAPTER IV

The Bloodstained Paper

THERE was an instant's pause. Then Inspector Warfield came forward and looked more closely at the ring which she displayed. I, as well as Warfield, could see the exquisite carving of the crest and the motto—*Constanti et Vero.* A man's ring, it fitted her slender finger loosely.

"I really think you had better rest, Miss Fechet," he began, and regarded her with an air of concern. "This has been too much for you. Why not go home for awhile?"

She wavered perceptibly, then declined the suggestion. "I live around the corner," she explained, "and if I feel worse I will go back to my room. But just now—"

"This is no place for you." Coroner Clark spoke with decision. A second before, I had intercepted a quick motion of Warfield's finger, intended for the coroner, and missed by the young girl; evidently Clark had read Warfield's wishes aright, for the inspector's expression brightened as the former continued, with marked brusqueness, to address Claire. "I have sent for the undertaker and on his arrival—oh, well, it is better that you are not around."

It was impossible for the girl to grow whiter, but her gray eyes contracted, while horror grew in their soft depths.

"You—you—make plans without waiting to consult Mr. Reade's relative—his nephew—" She stumbled in her speech and Warfield did not let her finish.

"You refer to Joe Reade?" he questioned and, as she nodded, "Where is he likely to be at this hour?"

Her gaze rested on the desk clock. "At the *Evening Star,* I presume. Shall I call him?"

But Warfield also reached for the telephone. "Permit me," and he literally took the instrument from her grasp. He was apparently familiar with the number wanted and on getting it inquired for the reportorial rooms and then for Joe Reade. "He has left, you say?" he called into the mouthpiece a minute or so later. "Did Mr. Reade state where he was going? No? Well, tell him to come instantly to his uncle's home—he will understand." Warfield's eyes, as well as mine, had continued to rest on Claire and we both noted the rigidity of her attitude.

"He will understand," repeated Warfield softly, as the receiver clicked back on its hook. Claire's breathing quickened.

"Joe has only the one uncle," she pointed out, and I could not but admire the evenness of her tone; she had evidently recovered her self-control. "He would be very dull of comprehension if he did not grasp your meaning."

For a second they eyed each other. Warfield was

the first to look away. He rose briskly from his seat across the desk from her.

"I really must second Dr. Clark's advice," he remarked smoothly. "Frankly, there is no reason why you should be subjected to further harrowing scenes."

It was with marked reluctance that she rose, but when she went to take up her hat and coat, the coroner stopped her with a question.

"What is your home address, Miss Fechet?"

"Studio House—just back of this on the other street." She moved her arm vaguely toward the south. "The number slips my mind, we use it so seldom."

"We?"

"Miss de Peyster and I . . ." As she spoke the other's name, the girl's tormented expression changed to one of contrition. "Ah, I had forgotten!" She covered her confusion with a slight cough. "Christine must be told; she should be here now. I will call her," and again she advanced toward the telephone.

"Christine?" broke in Warfield, following her across the room. "And who is Christine?"

"My friend with whom I live." Claire regarded us, a faint air of wonder discernible. "Surely you have heard of Christine de Peyster?"

I racked my memory, then shook a puzzled head. Warfield also was silent; not so Dr. Clark, however.

"Oh, yes, quite a local celebrity," he commented, and his condescending tones, even more than his words, brought color to Claire's white cheeks. "I'm thinking you can rest upstairs, Miss Fechet, as well as else-

where, and we may want you a little later; how about it, Inspector?"

It was the first time he had so addressed Warfield and I saw her wince; until that moment I do not believe she had fully realized the latter's official connection with the police. If Warfield was surprised by the coroner's sudden change of plans for Claire, he concealed it admirably.

"An excellent idea," he agreed, and raised a beckoning finger. Detective Wilson, who had stood in the farther doorway, an interested spectator of all that had taken place in the secretary's office, came forward.

"There's a sitting room upstairs where the young lady can rest," he volunteered. "I'll take her there, Inspector."

"Do so." Warfield's cool, matter-of-fact voice apparently acted as a tonic on Claire, for, straightening her slim figure, she made for the hall. I had taken several steps in the same direction when I thought I heard my name pronounced and I looked back in time to see the coroner and Warfield, still standing where we had left them, talking together guardedly, their attention centered, judging from their gestures, on the secretary's desk and its relative position to the door leading into the death chamber.

"Guess you'd better come upstairs, too, Mr. Burton." The detective's hail reached me at the front door. I wheeled about and glared at the speaker, but my wrath faded as I read the unmistakable appeal in Claire Fechet's eyes. She was leaning forward over the stair

railing and I just caught her low-spoken, "Do come, Mr. Burton."

For a second I stood in indecision. Down the hall toward the kitchen I glimpsed a man lounging in the entry, while close at hand another policeman stood with his shoulders braced against the front door; he had not moved as I advanced. It did not need any quick thinking on my part to realize that Claire Fechet and I were virtually prisoners in the Reade mansion. With mounting wrath I joined the pair on the staircase and accompanied them to the second floor. It was an English basement house, whether so planned in the long ago it was hard to say, but I caught sight of a spacious dining room toward the rear, while across from the head of the stairs a wide doorway with portières drawn back, gave entrance to a formal drawing-room. Avoiding that, Wilson led us toward the front and into what he had described downstairs as a "sitting room." I sank down in one of the luxurious chairs as Claire threw herself onto a broad couch under the window, and the detective settled back on a settee close to the entrance. From his expression I gathered that he was lending an attentive ear to what was happening below stairs, while keeping us under observation with the least physical effort.

For five minutes or so I was content to lounge where I was. The room, artistically furnished, gave clear indication of its owner's wealth and his varied tastes. Old color prints, depicting the sports of other days, decorated the walls, while a square table, standing

under the dome light, with four chairs drawn close, held two packs of cards and a mahogany case filled with poker chips. Toward one corner of the room was a small Chippendale sideboard and, judging from the decanters and glasses, the card room, for so I designated it in my mind, was often the scene of convivial parties. Had one been staged the night before?

Under pretense of requiring a match for my cigarette, I rose and sauntered across to the sideboard; it was well stocked with liquor for the three decanters were full and one glass still contained sherry. I caught a whiff of the wine as I reached over to pick up a match box lying beside it. My swift glance showed that all the other glasses, and there were but five in evidence on the polished mahogany, were empty and also clean. Had Alfred Reade poured out a glass of sherry and left it untasted or had some guest, drinking alone, been interrupted in quenching his thirst?

"Makes your mouth water, all that good liquor," remarked Wilson, and smacked his lips together suggestively—or was it sympathetically? "Don't touch anything, Big Boy, or your finger prints might get you in bad."

Thoroughly incensed, I swung on the detective. "Speak more respectfully, if you are called on to speak to me at all. I am not here to be bullied by an insignificant police pup!"

Wilson got to his feet with astonishing speed, considering his bulk. His name, repeated in stentorian tones down the hall, checked his vitriolic outburst and

with a furious glance at me, he obeyed his superior's call and darted outside the room.

Left alone for the first time with Claire Fechet since the discovery of Reade's body in the room below, I crossed over to her couch and looked down at her recumbent figure. She was well worth a second glance, for her face, in repose, and despite its marble whiteness, was classical in outline. A tear rolled from under her closed eyelids and splashed down on her small, shapely hand, resting on the pillow also. She did not look a day over sixteen—surely too young to be involved in the dastardly murder of her employer!

She opened her eyes and at sight of me so near her, shrank farther back among her pillows; then, gathering courage, rested her weight on one elbow and looked beyond me and around the room.

"He's gone!" She whispered the words, and I bent even closer to catch what she said. "Tell me"—her tear-blurred eyes stared into mine while her fingers plucked at my hand—"what did I say to induce the coroner to send me here instead of letting me go home? What *could* I have said?"

"You are wanted downstairs." The gruffly spoken order interrupted her hectic whisper, then as she swung her feet to the floor, Wilson, back once more, jerked his thumb in my direction; "I mean this gentleman here," with heavy sarcasm. "You can rest a bit longer, Miss."

I still felt the feverish clutch of Claire's hot fingers as I passed Wilson and went down the staircase.

Three men were standing by the dead man when I once again entered the living room on the first floor. Warfield beckoned to me to join them.

"Sergeant Meade of the Finger-Print Division," he explained, and I exchanged a nod with the only stranger in the room. "Now, tell us, Mr. Burton, is everything in this place just as you saw it when you were ushered in here by Miss Fechet? Look around carefully before you answer."

I took his advice literally. Every electric light in the room had been turned on and that, coupled with the sunshine, left no darkened spot where so much as a scrap of paper could be overlooked. Twice, thrice, I stared about. Then, in spite of the presence of the other men, in spite of the brilliant, friendly light, a sense of impending evil gripped me and sent the blood thumping through my veins.

"Everything appears the same—the furniture, I mean." I paused to clear my throat. "The body looks a bit more slumped forward, perhaps."

Warfield nodded. "Quite right," he acknowledged. "Now, for the smaller objects; that table there"—he indicated one close to the dead man—"is everything on that table as you recall seeing it?"

"If by 'everything' you mean the smoking set and the long envelope, yes," I responded. "I should say nothing there had been disturbed."

"And the desk over yonder?" persisted the inspector and I eyed him sharply. What prompted his evident purpose of asking about each and every article in the

room? I had already told him that the furniture appeared to be undisturbed. The flat-top mahogany desk, to which he had called my attention, was a mate, except that it was larger and more massive, of the one in the secretary's office; it was, incidentally, the heaviest piece of furniture in Reade's living room and stood at the far end, cater-cornered to the dead man.

Evidently Warfield found my silence annoying, for he spoke more sharply, at the same time changing the form of his question.

"Is that desk, Mr. Burton, where it stood originally upon your entrance here with Miss Fechet, or did you shove it aside, accidentally perhaps, when trying to find aid?"

"No," I answered quickly, "neither one of us passed that desk to reach Mr. Reade—"

"And yet you noted its position?"

"I did," breaking in, in my turn. "I even looked back of it. To be quite frank, Inspector, that desk is the only piece of furniture in this room, behind which a person could hide successfully."

"You are of an observing turn of mind," commented the coroner, and his friendly manner invited confidence. "But has it occurred to you that a person, crouching behind that desk, would have to leave its shelter, walk down the room—all within full sight of Reade—stop within three feet of him, and then, dropping on his knees, shoot Reade from that position?"

"And why from a kneeling position?" I demanded quickly.

"Because the path of the bullet shows Reade's assailant was crouching on the floor and shot from that position." Coroner Clark demonstrated his point by dropping on one knee a few feet from Reade. "The bullet hole in the back of Reade's head is higher than the wound in the forehead, and the hole in the wall shows that the bullet continued upward."

"Well, a person, hiding behind that desk, could creep forward on hands and knees and escape observation better than if he walked out into the room," I began, clinging tenaciously to my side of the argument. Coroner Clark shook his head in dissent.

"In either posture the man would have been observed by Reade," he insisted, with equal warmth. "And do you suppose that Reade, powerfully built physically, would have sat quiet in this chair and let himself be shot to death? Remember, there is no sign of a struggle having taken place."

I stood silent, considering. What the coroner said was logical, except—

"It depends on how absorbed Reade was in his mail," I pointed out slowly and drew a swift look from Warfield.

"You gather, then, that he was reading a letter?" he asked. "Why?"

"The paper in his lifeless hand, the torn envelope under his chair implied as much," I retorted, nettled by his skepticism. "Any fool would jump to that conclusion, Inspector, especially after reading the postmark on the registered letter lying on the table by Reade."

"Oh, you handled that?"

"I did not." My flat denial focused their attention upon me and the finger-print expert edged closer. "But later, while you, Inspector, examined the bullet hole in the wall behind Reade's chair, I stooped over the table and read Reade's address on the envelope, saw that it was not opened, and saw also that the registry mark as well as the Washington postmark, were both clear—the date on the latter being Saturday, April 13th, 5 P.M. Realizing that no mail, excepting that sent special, is delivered on Sunday, I concluded the letter—or shall we say letters—came in this morning's mail, and that Reade was absorbed in the contents of one of them when he was shot to death."

Warfield continued to regard me while the others waited patiently. "Your line of reasoning coincides with ours," he admitted with flattering emphasis. "We have already communicated with the city post office and Todd, the postman on this route, is on his way here. Until he comes, we'll continue, with your permission, to ask a few more questions."

Warfield's sudden amiability was almost as distasteful as his former arrogant manner—at least the latter appeared natural to one of his temperament, and an old adage, long forgotten, flashed into my mind: "Beware of the Greeks when they come bearing gifts."

"I'll answer your questions to the best of my ability, Inspector, but I must ask you to hurry." I paused and glanced at my wrist watch significantly. "My train leaves at noon."

Warfield and the man he had introduced as Sergeant Meade, the finger-print expert, exchanged glances. It was the latter who first addressed me.

"Did you touch anything on the desk, Mr. Burton?" he asked courteously.

"No."

"Nor anything else in the room? Think, sir, before you answer."

Surprised by the seriousness of his manner, I paused and went over everything that had occurred since my dramatic entrance into what promised to be a *cause célèbre* in the nation's capital. "I touched nothing, Sergeant; stop, though, I did open that closet over there, thinking perhaps the murderer had concealed himself in it."

"I see." Meade looked at me gravely, then reaching into a battered Gladstone bag, he took out a narrow strip of glass. Resting it carefully on the mahogany table, he poured some black substance on its surface. "Just press your fingers on that, sir; your thumb also, now, on this sheet of blank paper—ah, thank you."

More perturbed than I cared to admit, I stepped back to my former position toward the center of the room as Meade placed the card bearing my finger prints carefully in his wallet and returned his paraphernalia to his bag.

"You've been asking me what's altered in this room, Inspector," I began, aggressively. "Nothing, so far as I can see, save the piece of paper which Reade held in his right hand. What has become of that?"

In nowise disturbed by my question, Coroner Clark removed his handkerchief from his pocket and, unfolding it, disclosed the bloodstained paper.

"Meade has already tested it for finger prints," he explained mildly; "those it bears are—Reade's."

His statement was evidently news to Warfield for the inspector's expectant expression changed to one of manifest disappointment.

"How about the envelope under the chair?" he asked eagerly. "Have you examined that?"

"Not yet." Taking a slender steel instrument, resembling a pair of tiny surgical forceps, from his bag, Meade picked up the envelope with deft skill and displayed it. "The postmark is blurred," he exclaimed a second later, in tones of deep disgust, and turned the envelope over. "No return address, only Reade's typed on the other side."

The coroner extended the bloodstained paper, still resting in his snowy handkerchief, and held it alongside the envelope.

"The paper is folded in its former crease," he explained; "it is, when folded thus, the right size to fit that envelope."

"The inference being it came out of that envelope," remarked Warfield, brusquely; impatience at Clark's slower speech had gained the upper hand. "Well, what is written on the inside of the paper? I did not turn it over or remove it from Reade's grasp, waiting for the photographers and for Meade."

"I removed the paper after the photographs were

made, and in the coroner's presence," explained Meade. "After my tests, I returned the paper to Dr. Clark." He waited an instant, then added impressively: "Evidently Mr. Reade contemplated matrimony—"

"Ah, a love letter?"

"No." As he spoke, the coroner opened the paper carefully and displayed the printed form with its filled-in spaces. "A marriage license."

Warfield and I stared at Clark in bewildered silence. Again the coroner was the first to speak.

"The license, granted at the City Court House, bears Saturday's date," he said slowly, to be interrupted by the impatient inspector.

"Whose name is given on it?" he demanded. "The woman's, I mean."

"That of Christine de Peyster."

"Christine de Peyster?" repeated Warfield.

"Exactly." Coroner Clark refolded the paper. "Christine de Peyster, local celebrity, and the woman with whom Reade's secretary, Miss Fechet, makes her home."

CHAPTER V

A Dramatic Interruption

AT the sound of raised voices in the secretary's office, Coroner Clark handed the handkerchief-covered marriage license to Inspector Warfield, with a word or so spoken too low to reach me; then he moved forward to meet a man wearing a city postman's uniform at that second shown into Reade's living room.

"Charlie Todd, sir"; the latter introduced himself without formality. "They said at Headquarters to report to you here when I'd covered my route. What's wrong, may I ask?"

By way of reply the coroner stepped to one side and Todd had an unobstructed view of Alfred Reade; the postman's cheeks lost their ruddy hue and a horrified cry escaped him.

"Good God! What's happened to Mr. Reade?"

"Shot to death," replied Warfield laconically, "while reading his morning mail."

Todd took out a handkerchief and mopped his brow. "That's a sight to give any one a turn," he ejaculated; "especially when, like me, he's seen Mr. Reade alive not long ago."

"Ah, that's the point!" And Warfield's tone conveyed his satisfaction. "You saw him alive—when?"

"When I delivered his mail." The postman paused to consider. "Seven-thirty, it was." He shifted the empty pack on his back and took from its deep recess a package of colored cards. Running through them, he found the one he wanted and displayed it— "Yes, that's the time on this return slip for his registered letter."

I, too, studied the card with interest, and especially the bold, unshaken signature—A. Reade. No sense of hurry, no presentiment of impending tragedy had guided the hand that penned the signature—I had its facsimile in my pocket attached to the letter that had bidden me lose no time in reaching Washington and to meet the writer in friendly conference that fateful morning.

"Let me have that card?" The request came from Sergeant Meade and, taking it, he and the Gladstone bag, which he grasped in one hand, departed to the opposite side of the room and from the click I heard a moment or so later, I gathered he was first photographing the small pasteboard and then otherwise examining it for possible finger prints, for he did not rejoin our little group.

"Is seven-thirty your regular hour for mail delivery in this block?" questioned Warfield.

"Yes, thereabouts; sometimes earlier or 'most likely a minute or two later, depending on the amount of mail I have for other houses," explained Todd. His eyes roved around the room and then settled once more on the dead man—once again he mopped his face. "I've

served this route goin' on ten years now, and that sight's the most awful thing I've met. Say, can't you wash his cheeks of powder marks and blood?"

"Presently." Warfield consulted his notebook. "Was it customary for Mr. Reade to take in the mail each morning?"

"Oh, no, sir; I usually put the mail through the letter-drop by the side of the front door, or else Mrs. Grymes takes it in if she's airing the first floor before the Chinaman comes." A violent sneeze brought the color back to Todd's cheeks; it interrupted his remarks only temporarily, however. I could see that his loquaciousness pleased Warfield. "This time, having a registered letter, I rang the bell—"

"How often?" demanded the coroner.

"Once a long ring and then I gave the button a short push; Mr. Reade opened the front door—"

"How about the outer vestibule door?" The second interruption came from Inspector Warfield. "Was that closed?"

"Closed, yes; but not locked," explained Todd. "I couldn't reach the letter-drop if they locked the vestibule door. So as usual I'd stepped inside the vestibule and was waiting there for Mrs. Grymes, maybe, to open the door, and not expecting to see Mr. Reade, himself."

"Oh, then he was not generally around at that hour?"

"He may have been around the house, but I never had him answer the door in person," replied Todd, "leastway not at that hour. He's taken the mail later

in the day when he's happened to be going out or coming in and we've met on the steps."

"So you are fully acquainted with him?" Warfield hastily amended his ambiguous question without giving Todd a chance to answer it. "I mean are you perfectly acquainted with Mr. Reade by sight? It wasn't anybody else who signed that registry card this morning?"

Todd's china-blue eyes opened wide. "I'll say it wasn't—on oath," he protested with hearty emphasis. "And I know Mr. Reade's signature; he's given me checks for tickets to our annual postmen's summer excursions; liberal checks they were, too, and at Christmas he's always remembered me most generous." He eyed Warfield questioningly in his turn. "No, sir, 'twasn't no make-believe Mr. Reade who spoke to me this morning, but he, himself, dressed as he's sitting there."

"Did he seem wide awake," asked Coroner Clark, "or as if just aroused from sound slumber?"

Todd scratched a puzzled head and rolled a quid of tobacco from one cheek to the other. "You've got me there," he confessed; "I just didn't notice. Mr. Reade spoke very polite when he took the letters—"

"How many were there?" demanded Warfield.

"Two—"

"Are these the two?" Warfield led the way to the mahogany table, and, deeply interested, I trailed after the three men. Sergeant Meade, his work on the registry card evidently completed, stepped in ahead of

me and I was obliged to stretch to my full height to see over his shoulder what was taking place.

"That's the registered letter," exclaimed Todd with convincing positiveness, "but where's the other?"

"Here," and Sergeant Meade thrust into view the envelope which he had taken from under the dead man's chair, carefully holding it between the ends of the steel forceps. "Don't touch the envelope."

Todd's extended hand dropped to his side and he looked at the finger-print expert a trifle abashed.

"Sorry," he mumbled apologetically. "Well, yes, I'm sure that's the second envelope; it was small, just like that."

"Can you swear to the envelopes being identical?" asked the coroner.

Todd hesitated. "Turn it over, sir," and, as Meade complied with his request, turning the envelope right side up, his eyes brightened. "Sure, that's the same; I remember the three-cent commercial stamped envelope—the post office hasn't issued that kind since the War, when we had three-cent letter postage, and there's mighty few of them in use to-day."

"I knew there was something odd about the envelope," admitted Clark. "You are right, Todd; that stamped envelope hasn't been sold to the general public for years. A good point, eh, Warfield?"

The inspector grunted his agreement as Meade returned the registry card to the postman. "Did you notice anything unusual in Reade's manner? For in-

stance, was he a bit excited—nervous, perhaps? Think carefully before you answer."

For the first time Todd showed signs of restiveness under the continued questioning. "I've just said I didn't notice Mr. Reade's manner particularly, when this gentleman here"—indicating Clark—"asked if he appeared sleepy or wide awake, and I can't tell you differently now."

"True," agreed Warfield with perfect good humor. "I had forgotten the coroner's question, Todd. Tell me," he lowered his voice to a confidential pitch, "when you stood in the vestibule while Reade signed his name, did you happen to look past him and into the hall?"

"Sure." Todd twisted the tobacco about in his mouth with practiced skill; "the front door was open quite a bit."

"And what did you see?" eagerly.

"The hall furniture."

My good opinion of the bluff, middle-aged postman increased as I caught the faint twinkle in his eye, brought there by Warfield's very obvious disappointment at his commonplace answer. In spite of the solemnity of our surroundings, I gathered that Todd enjoyed stringing a representative of the Washington police force.

Warfield was quick to conceal his feelings, however, and diverted the conversation into other channels.

"You mentioned a Chinaman, Todd—"

"Wah Ling, the cook," broke in the postman. "He gets mail here, quite a bit of it, and Mrs. Grymes, the

housekeeper, an' Andy—an' that's all, excepting Mr. Reade."

Warfield jotted down the names as Todd rattled them off. "This Andy?" he questioned, looking up. "What's his position?"

"Chauffeur," promptly, "an' Mrs. Grymes' husband. He's English, he says, an' some of his letters come from foreign parts."

The inspector returned his pencil and notebook to their resting place in his coat pocket.

"So the Reade household comprised Mr. Alfred Reade, his housekeeper, and chauffeur. Mrs. Grymes —by the way, what's her first name?"

For the first time Todd was not so ready with his answer. "Ann, I believe, but 'mostly we call her 'Mrs. Andy.'" He cocked one eye at the inspector inquiringly. "If you mean by 'Reade's household,' that Wah Ling lives in this house, you're wrong. He stays with his people in Chinatown, though his mail pretty generally comes here."

"Wait," and the postman, who had turned toward the door, evidently concluding that the interview was at an end, paused.

"There's one person you've overlooked," went on Warfield smoothly. "Is Joe Reade's mail left here pretty generally, too?"

"Not now it isn't," responded Todd, hitching the strap of his mail bag into a more comfortable position over his shoulder; "for I carry Mr. Joe's letters to the Alamo and put them in Dr. Wyant's box; he's been

living with the doctor for the past week—why, here's the boy now!"

While the postman was still speaking, a tall, athletic young chap, hatless and with every indication of extreme agitation, had dashed into the room, but his running gait slowed down and came to a faltering stop as he approached closer. I doubt if he was aware of our presence for his gaze never left the body of his relative.

"Good God, he's dead!" His horror-stricken whisper was barely audible. Suddenly he dropped to his knees and raised his hand; it hovered over the stiffened form, then with a gesture of abhorrence, of repulsion almost, young Reade drew back and covered his twitching features from our sight.

Feeling decidedly out of place, I was on my way to the door when Inspector Warfield's voice cut the stillness.

"Mr. Reade, I am distressed, sir." With a swiftly sympathetic gesture, he laid a friendly hand lightly on the young man's shoulder. "What can we do for you?"

Either the touch of another's hand or the sound of a stranger's voice, or both, had an electric effect on Joseph Reade. Leaping to his feet, he wheeled about and glared at us, his eyes red, staring, in their white setting.

"It's ghastly—unbelievable!" he gasped. "Why, Uncle Alfred loved life."

Warfield's expression changed. "What's this, Mr.

Reade; do you imply that your uncle committed suicide?"

Joe stared at the inspector, a curious play of emotions altering his good looks, and not for the better. "Do you mean that Uncle Alfred did not kill himself?"

Warfield nodded. "The wound could not have been self-inflicted—see for yourself."

Slowly, reluctantly, Joe glanced back at his uncle, then hastily averted his eyes.

"He was shot at close range," he muttered; "the powder marks prove that. What was to prevent his holding the gun before his eyes and pulling the trigger?"

"At so close a range he would have shot off the top of his head." I spoke unguardedly, entirely without thought, but my knowledge of firearms had gotten the better of my judgment. I would have given much to have recalled the words when I caught the inspector's penetrating gaze resting on me.

"Come back, Mr. Burton," he suggested cordially, and, as I complied with his request, "Mr. Burton might have added," he continued and even his subdued tones sounded loud in the deadly quiet, "that no weapon was found in this room, which would have been the case had your uncle, Mr. Reade, committed suicide."

Young Reade transferred his attention to me. "You say no weapon was found?" he cried, and I marveled at the transformation in his appearance. Had Warfield also noticed the change? Apparently not, for he was still regarding me with annoying persistence.

"No weapon was found." He echoed young Reade's words almost automatically. "Except the pistol carried by Mr. Burton—for his own protection."

Joe Reade regarded us in puzzled silence for an instant. "I—I—don't understand," he admitted, hesitating palpably, and his eyes roved around the room. He nodded absently to Todd, then stared blankly at Coroner Clark and Sergeant Meade. If the presence of the men surprised him, he failed to comment on it. A thought struck him and he moistened his lips.

"By what authority are you here, sir?" he asked Warfield; quickly the latter introduced himself and the others. At mention of the coroner's name Joe moved uneasily.

"Look here, doctor, we can't leave Uncle Alfred lying here like this," he protested vehemently. "Come, some of you, and help carry him upstairs."

Sergeant Meade moved away from the door. "The stretcher men have been waiting for some time," he said, and led them forward.

Five minutes later as we lined up instinctively to allow the stretcher with its blanketed figure to be carried past us, I found Inspector Warfield at my elbow.

"We can't spare you yet, Mr. Burton," he said; "and, to be quite candid, you will have to postpone your departure from Washington."

"Why?" heatedly.

My question went unanswered as Warfield stepped forward and accompanied Joe Reade into the hall and up the staircase. Their progress was slow, owing to

the difficulty experienced by the stretcher-bearers in mounting the winding stairs. I watched them in fuming impatience for a minute or two, then, tossing my hat on the nearest chair, I, too, went upstairs. Coroner Clark had preceded the pitiful procession, and on reaching the first bedroom floor just behind the others, I saw that he had taken up his station at a door halfway down the hall. At a wave of his hand the stretcher-bearers moved toward him. An exclamation escaped Joe.

"You've made a mistake—that's my old room," he protested. "Uncle Alfred's suite is at the front."

"The police are there now," replied Clark, and looking about, I missed Sergeant Meade. "We will put your uncle in this room temporarily."

"Wait, wait!" The low, breathless cry came from the staircase, and, being closest to it, I turned back and looked down.

Up the circular stairs toiled a woman, her clinging fingers seeking support from the mahogany railing. At a signal from the coroner, the stretcher-bearers had paused and they all turned expectantly as she reached the top step. Catching sight of the motionless figure under the blanket, the woman reeled backward, but only for a second. Before any one could divine her intention she had darted forward and jerked the blanket from Reade's bloodstained face.

"Mrs. Andy!" Startled into speech, Joe rushed to her side. Unheeding, she continued to peer down at Alfred Reade, her expression inscrutable. "Don't you

understand," went on Joe, gently touching the housekeeper, "Uncle's dead—and—and—I'm the head of the family now."

Slowly Mrs. Grymes raised her head and her stiffened fingers let go their hold of the blanket.

"Yes, Mr. Joe, I understand," she answered, but her submissive tone did not match the hard, pitiless stare she turned upon the dead man's nephew.

CHAPTER VI

Facts and Fancies

THE room into which we had been hustled, Mrs. Andy Grymes, young Joe Reade and I, needed airing badly, and I thought strongly of opening one of the windows, but so insistent had been Inspector Warfield's instructions that nothing be disturbed, even in what the housekeeper described as her study, that I contented myself with placing a chair near the door and keeping that door wide open. In the hall, men were coming and going, but when they conversed it was in subdued whispers; one, with a more authoritative manner than the others, buttonholed Inspector Warfield and carried him off into what I judged to be the suite of rooms occupied by Alfred Reade. Coroner Clark came from there a minute or two later and, meeting a sedate, elderly man, in solemn black, escorted him through the same doorway where, five minutes before, the stretcher-bearers had borne all that was mortal of the master of the mansion.

It was a wide, square hall, so far as I could see, with an archway opening into the tiny corridor which connected the housekeeper's living quarters, of which the study evidently formed a part, for I had caught a glimpse of a pair of twin beds just before the com-

municating door between it and the farther room was closed by Warfield. *Why* we had been closeted in the study immediately following Mrs. Andy's sudden appearance in the hall, interested me less than *when* I could leave, for there was much to be done in the few hours left to me in Washington.

With the square hall at last devoid of interest, I turned an attentive eye on my two companions. Since our entrance, Joe had tramped with maddening regularity up and down before the fireplace, his moody gaze fixed always on the pattern of the Axminster rug. In marked contrast to his agitation was Mrs. Andy's immobility. If she had been carved from stone she could not have sat more quiet, more expressionless. Occasionally she lifted her eyes and glanced at Joe and then at me, but their dark depths gave no hint as to her innermost feelings. Openly and unashamedly I studied the housekeeper—she was within the radius of my drifting tobacco smoke, but her air of detachment placed her far beyond the confines of the small room.

Plainly dressed in a gown of some dark material which, in spite of its simplicity, indicated expensive tastes, Mrs. Andy seemed the personification of middle-aged respectability; in her late thirties, I judged her to be, for her olive-tinted skin was unwrinkled and her carefully marcelled black hair lacked even one gray lock. She was not a large woman, nor particularly robust in appearance, but a look at her hands showed that she was no stranger to manual work; they rested in her lap with fingers interlocked. My gaze drifted

downward to her well-shod feet, a bit of mud had caked on the sole of one of the suede slippers—otherwise her attire was immaculate.

"Let's have a cigarette." The unceremonious request startled me from my contemplation of the housekeeper, but even as my hand sought the package of Luckies, my eyes traveled upward from Joe's dusty shoes to his white, haggard countenance. It was not until the cigarette was lighted that he again addressed me. "Are you connected with Police Headquarters?" he demanded, and, at the negative shake of my head: "Then why are you here?"

"I called by appointment to see your uncle, Mr. Reade, and when ushered into his presence by Miss Fechet, I found him—"

"Dying?"

"Dead." Startled by the sudden flame in Joe's bloodshot eyes, I answered his quivering whisper with unusual emphasis and the sinister word echoed in the stillness—or was it that the housekeeper had involuntarily pronounced it after me? The rocking-chair she was occupying creaked as she shifted her position; despite her apparent aloofness, I felt sure Mrs. Andy was drinking in everything we said.

"Well, what then?" prompted Joe. The urgency in his voice had, however, the opposite effect upon me than that he desired; it dampened my willingness to impart information to these two, neither of whom appeared anxious to address each other, or was it that I, a stranger, proved a restraining influence?

"I notified Police Headquarters"—I paused to toss my cigarette stub into the fireplace, finding no ash tray handy. "The rest you know."

That my reply was unsatisfactory was evidenced by Joe's impatient flip of his cigarette. He hesitated palpably before again addressing me.

"And Miss Fechet?" He cleared his throat of some impediment. "What became of her?"

It was a question I had already asked myself. What had become of her? The last that I had seen of Claire she had been resting on a couch in the card room. Was she still there? When the stretcher-bearers had tramped across the second-floor hall and continued up the circular staircase, I had looked expectantly toward the card room, only to find the door closed. Perhaps the noise made by us had not penetrated the thick mahogany panels in sufficient volume to induce the young girl to investigate its cause.

I considered Joe thoughtfully; there was something vaguely familiar about his muscular figure, his wavy dark hair and eyes set wide apart under a broad forehead—ah, I had it—the likeness between uncle and nephew was unmistakable.

"Mr. Burton, this way, please." Coroner Clark's abrupt summons brought me to my feet and I shot into the hall with equal precipitancy. "Go into the front room, sir." And conscious that Clark waited in the doorway of the study to see that I carried out his directions, I strode ahead.

Inspector Warfield turned on my entrance. "Come

in, Mr. Burton, and close the door." His manner was cordiality itself. "I am anxious for a word with you in private."

"You are no more anxious than I am," I retorted heatedly. "Come, Inspector, why are you virtually detaining me here against my will? Oh, that's what it amounts to, with policemen guarding the entrance to the house."

"Quite the proper procedure," he answered with unruffled composure. "You must realize, Mr. Burton, that you are a material witness in a very terrible affair —the killing of Alfred Reade."

"True, to this extent," I agreed, striving to keep down my unruly temper, "as a material witness I can testify to facts which have come under my personal observation. Those facts have already been told to you; they bear only upon the discovery of Alfred Reade —after he was shot."

Warfield scanned me critically from head to foot. "A material witness testifies to facts which have come under his personal observation and *knowledge,*" he pointed out, emphasizing the last word. "And you have informed me that your knowledge of Reade was more extensive than your acquaintanceship."

I looked at the man inquiringly—what was he driving at?

"If you mean that we were unacquainted, you are right," I exclaimed; "if, however, you mean that my knowledge of Reade, gained through mutual friends

and some correspondence, will help in locating his murderer, you are wrong."

A smile brightened Warfield's stern features. "Well argued, Mr. Burton; it's a pity you gave up the practice of law, especially after your prosecution, when State's Attorney, of the Heminway brothers for the brutal murder of Stella Armstrong, celebrated as the Lost Heiress of Beaumont."

I stared hard at my companion. "Where did you get that information?"

By way of reply, Warfield pointed to a large red book lying open on a table at the head of the bed. "Oh, so you looked me up in *Who's Who?*"

The inspector shrugged. "Not I; the book was lying there open by Reade's bedside. I judged he refreshed his memory by perusing your biography when he retired last night or when he wakened this morning—the bed lamp, just over the book, is still lighted, you will notice."

Considerably mystified, I crossed to the bed table. Warfield was right; not only was the page turned to the short biographical sketch of me, but a pencil mark on the margin made it more conspicuous.

"What concerned Reade the most in your sketch is interesting to conjecture," went on Warfield as he joined me. "Was it your age—thirty-three," he pointed to the printed date of my birth, "or the fact that your career as a criminal lawyer had no equal in Texas?" He waited and looked at me under bent brows. "Which was it, Mr. Burton?"

I moved restlessly. "It's safer to attribute his interest in me to the sum of money I was bringing to him. However I'll admit it was a bit late for him to look up my career after I had started here with so much cash." I looked squarely at Warfield. "Now, Inspector, what particular feature centers *your* interest in me?"

"Your experience as an investigator of crime." There was no hesitancy in his answer and both words and manner bore the unmistakable stamp of sincerity. "I'll be frank with you, Mr. Burton; this is going to be a big case and I'd appreciate your advice."

He faced my searching regard unmoved. If an ulterior motive prompted his request for aid, no hint of it was given in his honest, steadfast gaze. I wavered in indecision as old instincts, old desires revived. Ah, he was clever, this Warfield; he had presented to me once again the fascination of a man-hunt, the clashing of wits between a lawbreaker and the prosecutor.

"Look about," advised the inspector softly, and putting aside all doubt I studied our surroundings with eager, inquisitive eyes.

Reade had liked his creature comforts, that I readily believed as I viewed the massive mahogany four-post bed, the chaise longue, with its soft pillows piled invitingly against its inclined back; a table with all smoking requirements, an antique bureau, a bridge lamp convenient to the chaise longue and a number of easy chairs. On one of the latter lay a pair of black trousers,

neatly folded, and a dinner coat, while Reade's underwear was on the foot of the bed.

Once again I turned my attention to the bed table. Close to the open book and the reading lamp stood a thermos pitcher and glass; the latter still held a small quantity of water. My gaze traveled from the glass to the bed with its tossed-back sheet and light summer blanket. Reade's pillow showed plainly that he had lain upon it, but the other pillow was undented, as well as that side of the bed.

Moving over to the chest of drawers, with Warfield an attentive shadow at my side, I studied the shaving mirror, the ivory toilet set and the round glass tray. On this last reposed a platinum and diamond stickpin, a Masonic ring, some small change—amounting to a couple of dollars—and a handsome leather wallet. Warfield said nothing as I picked up the wallet and ran through its contents.

"Five hundred and fifty-two dollars," I ended the count aloud and the inspector nodded agreement. "The intruder below stairs overlooked a rich haul."

"If burglary was his aim," Warfield said, dryly; "and not, primarily, the killing of Alfred Reade."

I put the wallet back where it had originally lain. "How about finger prints in this room?"

"None to be found." The glumness of his tone was noticeable. "Mr. Burton, here is the situation: this is the top floor, except for an attic, gained by ladder-like stairs and with no windows other than for ventilating purposes. No human being can enter the house by

way of the attic." He paused and added impressively; "The same can be said of this, the bedroom floor. I have been in every room and the only windows found unlocked and open are these three in this bedroom which, as you see, overlook the front street."

"You infer that no one could mount a ladder and climb up this wall without being seen?" As I spoke I crossed the room and tested one of the copper screens; the wood, evidently swollen, resisted my efforts to raise it.

"Exactly, Mr. Burton—and certainly not in broad daylight." Leaving the screen alone, I turned back and faced my companion. "Medical evidence proves that Reade had been dead about forty-five minutes when you walked into his living room, while the postman's evidence goes to prove that he was alive at thirty minutes after seven this morning."

"And I reached here about twenty-seven minutes past eight." I paused to jot the figures down on the back of an envelope which I drew haphazard from my pocket.

"Oh, then Miss Fechet kept you waiting three minutes in the vestibule—"

"No; only a minute and a half," I hastened to correct him. "We spent the rest of the time conversing, registering in Reade's appointment book and in walking into his presence." Looking up I read doubt in Warfield's expression. "She could not have killed him in that minute and a half—wait," as he showed every indication of interrupting me. "You've just said medical

evidence showed Reade had been dead forty-five minutes when we got to him." I did some figuring with my pencil. "By your reckoning, then, Reade was shot fifteen minutes after Charlie Todd, the postman, left the premises?"

"Just so," agreed the inspector; he leaned closer. "Suppose Miss Fechet got here earlier than she admitted to us? We have only her unsupported word that she came to work five minutes ahead of your arrival."

I considered his suggestion for a second in silence. "You are presupposing a motive for such a crime—"

Warfield's gesture was expressive. "Young and beautiful women have been known to kill their employers," he argued; "the motives—well—jealousy, unrequited love—" His expression changed. "Ah, the marriage license in Reade's hand, the marriage license proving that he contemplated matrimony with Christine de Peyster, the woman with whom Miss Fechet makes her home—perhaps he was taunting her with it—"

"And perhaps he wasn't," I cut in heatedly; that he had but voiced my thoughts annoyed me the more. "Come, Warfield, the only tangible proof we have so far that links Miss Fechet with the crime is that she had a key to this house, to enter at will—"

"Oh, you mean she might have come early, killed Reade, slipped away and come back again?" he exclaimed. "Not a bad suggestion—"

"A suggestion only." I dropped the envelope and

pencil into my coat pocket. "Others might have had equal access to the house."

This time it was the inspector who offered an objection. "All windows on the second floor I found securely locked, also those on the ground floor and in the basement," he explained. "The only means of leaving and entering are by the front door, the garden door in Reade's living room and the side door opening from the laundry into a narrow passageway between this and the building next door. These were all locked, too. Thus the person, man or woman, entering this house would have had to have a key to one of those three doors."

"Unless"—I paused to offer Warfield a cigarette which he declined. "Unless Reade admitted his murderer."

Warfield started and stared at me in open unbelief.

"Come, Mr. Burton; you don't really mean that?" His quiet tones conveyed a hint of irony. "Reade was a handsome man, a man who took pardonable pride in his personal appearance—did you notice his well-cared-for hands and polished finger nails? Yes? Well, you've just examined the expensive clothes hanging in his closet over there." Warfield pointed across the room. "And how was Reade dressed when you found him? In his pajamas and bare feet. Whom would he admit in such a costume?"

"Offhand"—I hesitated, considering my answer carefully, for the inspector's reasoning was logical—"I'd suggest a number of persons; for instance, his nephew,

Joe Reade; his cook, Wah Ling; Andy Grymes, chauffeur, and, eh, Mrs. Andy, Reade's housekeeper."

A queer look flashed into Warfield's deep-set eyes and was gone before I could analyze it. "Ah, the housekeeper"—he echoed my words softly. "She arrived on the scene when we carried Reade to this floor."

"And her whereabouts, up to that moment, Inspector, might prove interesting." The point-blank suggestion met instant and ready response.

"Excellent, Mr. Burton!" Warfield rubbed his hands together, a sign, I later learned, indicative of satisfaction. "I take it, sir, that you will reconsider leaving Washington at noon and, instead, assist in this investigation."

Again I hesitated; then drawing out a number of papers, I found my railroad ticket. "Can you spare some one to redeem this?" I asked, and, before I had time to reverse my decision, Warfield had dispatched one of his aides on my errand.

With mixed feelings I accompanied the inspector on a tour of the third floor; however much I might regret it later, I had succumbed to the lure of the tantalizing problem presented by the murder of Alfred Reade—or was it Claire Fechet's dejected figure lying on the sofa in the room below and the touch of her hot, clinging fingers that lingered so persistently in my thoughts, which blinded my better judgment?

The house, considering its size, was surprisingly lacking in bedrooms, on this, the only floor devoted to them. But those four, comprising Reade's own bed-

room; the one occupied by his nephew Joe, and in which Reade's body now rested; a guest room across from it; and Mr. and Mrs. Andy's bedroom were all commodious and with private baths attached.

"I examined each room with care, Mr. Burton," remarked Warfield, as we reëntered Reade's bedroom. "Not a bed had been disarranged, proving no one slept here last night except Reade; nor could we find anywhere any evidence that a person was here with him."

I was still pondering his statement when the hall door opened and in walked Mrs. Andy; a policeman towered behind her and then vanished from sight as the door swung shut on oiled hinges. The housekeeper advanced a few steps and stood passive, facing us.

"Your name?" questioned Warfield.

"Ann Grymes."

"Occupation?"

"I had charge of Mr. Alfred Reade's house—sir." The last word was obviously an afterthought.

"His housekeeper?" And at Warfield's insistence, the woman frowned.

"Yes." She shifted her bag from one hand to the other and suddenly waxed communicative. "My husband, Andrew, was Mr. Reade's chauffeur. We both left here yesterday afternoon to open Rosewood, Mr. Reade's country place near Ellicott City. It has been closed for the winter."

"And you came back—when, Mrs. Grymes?"

"Just drove home." Her large black eyes never

wavered. "When we reached the garage, Andy was detained by a policeman; not understanding, I ran all the way here—and—the policeman—" For the first time she stumbled in her rapid speech. "He hadn't prepared me for what I saw."

"A shocking sight," agreed Warfield sympathetically. "When did you last see Mr. Reade alive?"

"Yesterday, about seven in the evening. Mr. Reade was dining out." She paused irresolutely and eyed first Warfield and then the familiar furniture. "Mr. Reade wore his evening clothes then—those that are on the chair yonder."

Swiftly I broke into the conversation. "You left here last night to open a house closed for the winter and returned here this morning. Was that all the time required to put the country house in order?"

Her head swung in my direction and I met her steady gaze. "Oh, no, sir; we didn't plan to start putting the house in order until to-day—"

"Then why return with your task undone?" I demanded.

"Mr. Reade phoned to us to return." If she observed the surprise her reply created, her unmoved expression failed to indicate it. "He called me this morning at seven o'clock and told us to hurry back."

"Why?"

"He was expecting guests—"

"Who were they?"

"He didn't say." Mrs. Andy still regarded me steadily, her manner composed. "Wah Ling is in New

York for a few days and while Mr. Reade had planned to take his meals at the club until we got back, he needed either Andy or me to look after things with house guests coming."

"And you have no idea of the identity of these expected guests?" Warfield persisted, and, as she shook her head: "Didn't Reade mention their number or sex?"

Again she shook her head more vigorously. "Our conversation was very brief, sir; a neighbor, who kept a key to the back door of Rosewood, last Thursday let in the linemen from the telephone company, but they couldn't have done their work well, for the connection was poor and Central said it wasn't her fault. I could hardly hear Mr. Reade."

Inspector Warfield tugged at his ear until the tender flesh grew pink under his rough handling.

"You and Mr. Reade hand out house keys rather promiscuously," he remarked dryly. "Some neighbor has a key to his country home and you send the key to the front door of his town house to his secretary, Miss Fechet."

"By Mr. Reade's orders." There was some subtle change in the woman's monotonous voice. "He wanted her here early."

"Why?"

"He didn't tell me." The housekeeper's bag slipped from her restless fingers; she caught it again with a not ungraceful gesture.

"Mrs. Grymes." I stepped even closer as the hall

door opened a crack. Not wishing to be interrupted by the coroner or some other person in search of Warfield, I hurried my speech. "Did Mr. Reade ever tell you that he planned to marry?"

If I expected to create a sensation, I was doomed to disappointment. Mrs. Andy regarded me with tolerant mildness.

"That was an open secret, you might say, sir," she acknowledged unhesitatingly. "The real question was, which was he going to marry—Miss de Peyster or, eh, Miss Fechet."

"You lie, you abominable woman!" With cheeks afire, Claire Fechet pushed farther back the hall door and faced us, but for a second only. Before either Warfield or I could stop her, she had turned and dashed down the circular staircase.

CHAPTER VII

A Refusal of Marriage

"HELLO, what's going on here?" Coroner Clark put the question as he hurried toward us from the rear corridor, Joe Reade trailing after him.

"Miss Fechet made a hasty exit." Warfield's dry tones quickened. "Stay here, Mr. Reade, I must see you."

But it was the coroner's detaining hand that stopped Joe's bolt down the staircase rather than the inspector's peremptory request for an interview. Reluctantly the younger man turned about and stalked back into the housekeeper's study, evidently expecting Warfield to follow him there.

"With your permission, sir"—Mrs. Andy stepped forward, her manner deprecatory—"I'll go to the kitchen and prepare some breakfast; Andy and I left so early we didn't stop for food."

The coroner and Warfield exchanged a quick look; then the inspector moved aside so that the housekeeper had room to pass between us; the maneuver gave Clark time to precede her downstairs and forced her to pause by me for the fraction of a second. She was breathing quickly and the hand grasping her bag was clenched about its imitation tortoise shell frame with small re-

gard for its brittle qualities. At the stairhead she looked back and addressed us collectively.

"I'm sorry if I said anything to upset Miss Fechet; but it's the gospel truth—ask Mr. Joe if it isn't so," and with that parting injunction she hastened down the stairs.

Joe Reade was standing by the fireplace when we joined him.

"I thought you were never coming," he grumbled. "How long are you going to keep me here, Inspector? My regular work—"

"Must wait," broke in Warfield quietly. "Suppose you sit down by me, Mr. Reade; you look about done up."

The comment was couched in friendly tones but Joe took instant exception to it.

"And why shouldn't I look done up?" he demanded. "To find Uncle Alfred dead—killed in so terrible a manner, without a chance at self-defense. It's unbelievable, ghastly!"

"Not alone ghastly, Mr. Reade; a hideous affair!" The inspector perched himself on the arm of the old rocker. "I take it that you are anxious to assist the police in apprehending the murderer."

Reade dropped down in a chair with such force that it creaked. "Sure," he agreed, "that goes without saying. What help do you need?"

"Oh, family data, for instance." Warfield's inevitable notebook and pencil were whisked from his pocket, but while his fingers turned its pages, his eyes

never left the man he was questioning. "Are you a Washingtonian?"

"No; I was born in San Francisco. Mother died when I was a kid, and since then I've lived around in queer corners of the earth with my father, the Reverend Tracy Reade, a missionary."

"Is he living?"

"No, but my married sister still makes her home in Shanghai. I tired of the Orient and drifted back to this country, and eventually came here." Joe drummed his fingers on his chair arm, then as abruptly, ceased the noise. "And here I met Uncle Alfred for the first time."

"Then he and his brother Tracy were not on good terms?"

"Oh, nothing like that, but they had drifted apart, never meeting and seldom writing." Joe's slow smile relieved his face of the heavy lines, making him appear more boyish, more likable. "I belong to the poor relation branch of the family. Grandfather Reade cut Dad off with a shilling because he stuck to the ministry instead of ranching it in Texas; that gave Uncle Alfred his chance—I mean inheriting land in Beaumont. He struck oil and made his everlasting fortune." Joe stretched out his long legs and leaned back. "Through a friend here, Dr. Wyant, I got a job on the *Star,* and then looked up Uncle Alfred."

"And you came to live with him?" questioned Warfield as Joe paused.

"For a time, yes." Joe rubbed his chin; he had not

shaved that morning, judging from his appearance. "It wasn't a permanent arrangement."

"And why did you leave here, Mr. Reade?"

Joe shrugged. "Uncle Alfred was very kind and hospitable, but when you've knocked about as I have, you don't take kindly to restraint."

"Restraint?" echoed Warfield. "Be a little more explicit, Mr. Reade. What restraint?"

"He treated me like a kid"—Joe flushed. "I'm twenty-three, but Uncle Alfred wanted me in bed by midnight; said if I came home later it wakened the household."

"That implies"—a faint twinkle brightened the inspector's alert eyes and his lips twitched—"that you were a disturbing element in the early hours of the morning."

"If you mean I came home 'lit,' you're wrong," retorted Joe with warmth. "No; Uncle Alfred had his peculiarities and—and—oh, well, we scrapped over a latchkey."

Warfield and I looked at Joe in blank surprise; it was not the answer we had anticipated.

"You mean the key to the front door of this house?" the former asked.

"Sure. After I'd been here a month, I, eh, borrowed Andy's key on occasions. I never realized Uncle Alfred knew about it until a week ago, when I tried to open the front door and realized the lock had been changed." Joe glanced over at me. "Any more cigarettes?" he asked hopefully and I tossed him the

package. It was not until he had lighted one that he again addressed us.

"Uncle Alfred was in the front hall and opened the door; he wasn't very temperate in his language and I wasn't feeling any too kindly about his lack of trust in me. Ten minutes later I packed my duds and left for good."

Warfield's notebook and pencil lay idle on his knee. In silence he drew out a villainous-looking black pipe, filled it from his tobacco pouch and, striking a match, puffed steadily for a second or two until he had it drawing properly.

"You left for good, Mr. Reade," he said suddenly. "Am I to take that statement literally? You did not return to this house?"

"No; not until to-day." Through the haze of tobacco smoke Joe regarded us steadily. "And to think that Uncle Alfred and I fussed over so trivial a matter; it's sickening."

"But evidently your uncle did not regard your having a latchkey as a trivial matter," pointed out Warfield. "I don't quite get it—"

"No more did I at the time," said Joe, with engaging frankness. "But it's occurred to me since that Uncle Alfred had a reputation for eccentricity to keep up and so—" His voice trailed off into silence.

"And so he quarreled with his only relative—"

"In this country," the other interrupted quickly. "I must cable Sis."

"Later." And Joe sank back in his chair, a dis-

satisfied frown indicating his feelings. "When did you last see your uncle?"

"At the theater last night." Joe gave Warfield no time to complete his question; once more he fished out a cigarette from my depleted stock and lighted it. "He appeared in great spirits, gay and happy."

"You spoke, then?"

"Oh, no. He and Miss de Peyster occupied a stage box, and I went in on a newspaper pass." He smiled. "That means seats in the rear when the performance is a popular attraction."

"You were unaccompanied?"

Joe's answer was delayed by a fit of coughing and Warfield repeated his question with no hint of impatience in his pleasantly modulated voice. Of the three, I was the more restless. I had hurried to keep my early appointment with Alfred Reade without thought of breakfast, expecting our interview to be brief; now, thoroughly hungry, the close atmosphere of the smoke-laden room added materially to my sense of discomfort. Rising, I crossed over to the window, released the catch and pushed up the sash. The breeze was refreshing and I stood where I was for a second or two and looked out over the housetops. Over the housetop, I should have said, for the other buildings within my vision towered above Reade's three-story and basement mansion. The one exception in the latter's vicinity was an ivy-covered stone cottage, quaint in outline and undoubtedly a relic of a bygone age in American architecture. Its stone wall abutted Reade's property, mak-

ing the short alley from the side street a *cul-de-sac*. The cottage was but a story and a half, judging from the wide dormer window—two modernized into one —in the sloping roof. A flagged terrace on which stood rustic chairs and tables, ran the length of the cottage, and a tall and graceful birds' bath formed the center of the small garden laid out in beds and gravel walks.

It all looked most entrancing and it was with reluctance that I turned away. In doing so, my eye fell on a cigarette lying between the outer wire window screen and the inner sash, and I picked it up. Fresh and uncrushed, it was an expensive brand and I considered it gravely. Joe Reade had implied, by his request for cigarettes, that he had none; Inspector Warfield had refused mine and was now smoking a pipe, and I had noticed, during my first visit to the room, its lack of an ash tray; if Mrs. Andy and her husband smoked, or, only Andy even, the furnishings of the room would have given some indication of that fact. Secondly, I had been the one to raise the window which, according to the inspector, had been found closed and locked. Had Coroner Clark, when left in the study alone with Joe Reade, opened the window and smoking, dropped a cigarette from his package? That was easy to ascertain. Taking out my cigarette case, which I had neglected to fill on the train, I slipped the Dimitrino inside, while my thoughts went back to my arrival at the Alamo Apartment in the pouring rain—an April shower, over by midnight. Had the cigarette

been lying on the window ledge previous to that time, it would have shown evidence of its wet bath.

Once more I focused my attention on my companions; only a minute or so had passed and neither had spoken in that time.

"Who went to the theater with you, Mr. Reade?" Warfield's voice grew more emphatic and the boy ceased twiddling with my empty cigarette package.

"Miss Fechet," he answered gruffly. "We had supper at Childs, and I took her home."

"Home?"

"Her home, Studio House—Miss de Peyster's residence."

"And from there—?"

"I met Dr. Wyant and we walked back to the Alamo; I'm sharing his apartment, you know." Joe spoke in short, jerky sentences and my attention quickened; some emotion which he strove to master was gaining the upper hand, slowly but surely.

"Where did you meet Dr. Wyant?" went on the inspector, not heeding the younger man's restiveness.

"At Studio House."

"Ah, he had been calling on Miss de Peyster?" Joe nodded. "And at what hour was this?"

"Around midnight—the show was late." Joe rose and stretched himself, then glanced suggestively toward the hall door.

"And was Miss de Peyster at home? Had she and your uncle returned from the theater?"

"I don't know; I didn't go into the cottage." This

time Joe took several steps toward the door and paused to look back. "Coming?" he questioned.

"Just a minute." Warfield went over to the fireplace and knocked the tobacco out of his pipe. "Where were you between seven-thirty and eight-thirty this morning?"

"On my way to the *Star* building; that is, I stopped at the Press Club for breakfast." Joe was in the square hall by now and we were just back of him. "Say, Inspector, hadn't I better make plans for—for—" his eyes sought the closed door behind which lay his uncle's body, "for the funeral?"

"You must consult Coroner Clark first," was Warfield's guarded reply.

"And can I stay here, occupying the guest room?"

"No." And at the inspector's positive refusal, Joe flushed angrily.

"You forget I am my uncle's nearest of kin—"

"Whom he sent away from here."

"By———!" I caught Joe's uplifted fist and jammed him against the wall. "Let me get at him—I'll not stand such an implication!" he panted.

"Calm down!" ordered Warfield and his cold and cutting tone did more to quiet the boy than my restraining grip. "Your uncle has been murdered, Mr. Reade, and the police are now in charge here. The house will be padlocked—for the present."

"Let go!" Joe's words were for me, but his glowering look was still cast on Warfield. "I'll consult a lawyer."

"Do so," advised Warfield, and he smiled, anger gone. "Come, sir, we have no desire to aggravate the situation and we wish to help you, too."

"Like hell you do!" The muttered comment reached my ears alone, for the inspector had preceded Joe down the staircase and I came behind the slower moving youth. On reaching the first floor, Warfield stopped by the front door, and the policeman guarding the entrance straightened his lounging attitude.

"Can you tell me where your uncle banked?" he asked, addressing young Reade.

"The Metropolis Trust Company." Joe hesitated. "That is, he carried an account there, but perhaps you'd best ask Miss Fechet."

"Ah, yes; his secretary," and the inspector's voice was smoothness itself. "Miss Fechet had your uncle's entire confidence, did she not?"

"I presume so," shortly. Evidently Joe did not like the direction the questions were taking. "Excuse me, Inspector; I must get off that cable."

Deaf to the broad hint, Warfield went right ahead.

"You and Miss Fechet are on terms of intimacy—"

"By———!" Joe's fist swung dangerously close to Warfield's beaklike nose. "Speak more respectfully when you mention Miss Fechet."

"No offense meant," apologized the inspector in some haste. "I simply wish to know if you think highly of her?"

"So highly that I asked her to marry me," blurted out the other, his eyes aflame.

"Ah—then you two are engaged?"

"No." His voice changed, broke. "She refused me—last night." The color drained from Joe's cheeks and turning, he flung himself down the front steps, blind to those coming up them.

Coroner Clark turned to look after his retreating figure, then regarded Warfield inquiringly.

"Mrs. Grymes and Andy had breakfast with me," he said, as his two companions came farther into the hall. "I explained to them that no cooking could be done here just now, and that they would have to find other quarters temporarily."

"I can get rooms at the Alamo," broke in Mrs. Andy, "but I'd best engage them at once."

"Do so," agreed Warfield, but his gesture stopped Andy's attempt to follow his wife out of the house. "A word with you," and the chauffeur paused. "When young Mr. Reade resided here, you let him have your latchkey. Why?"

"I like to accommodate the lad." Andy's nationality accented his speech.

"For a consideration?"

The chauffeur's smooth-shaven lips broadened into a grin.

"The lad has very little money," he protested, "and his uncle never opened up the purse strings—not for him, at least; it's no wonder they didn't hit it off."

"So they quarreled?" We were all watching the thickset man in his neat black livery, but he seemed unmoved by our stares.

"They argued a bit," he admitted, "and finally fell out over the house keys."

"And how did Mr. Reade take your loaning Mr. Joe your key?" Warfield asked softly. The question brought added color to Andy's tanned cheeks, and a queer flash in his eyes.

"He docked my wages to pay for the new locks and then wouldn't give me another key," admitted the chauffeur. "Only had two made, and gave one to my wife and kept the other himself."

"And it was your wife's key you carried to Miss Fechet last night?"

"It was, sir. We stopped at Studio House on our way to Rosewood."

"Did you see Miss Fechet?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Reade gave me particular orders not to hand it to any one else, particularly not to Miss de Peyster." If Andy grew aware of our added interest, his stolid countenance never showed it by the flicker of an eyelash. "I put the key right in Miss Fechet's hand, and Mr. Joe can testify to it, for he was standing by her side and saw me."

Inspector Warfield considered the chauffeur in silence. Andy was the exact opposite of his wife, but while her austerity bordered on severity, his jovial bearing never overshadowed his respectful manner.

"And why did Mr. Reade tell you not to give the key to Miss de Peyster?" demanded Warfield. At the hastily put question the chauffeur evidenced some embarrassment.

"There's no way of accounting for Mr. Reade's whims," he said. "Miss de Peyster's a beautiful lady and a bit headstrong, too; maybe she didn't approve of—of—" he faltered—"of Miss Fechet having the run of the house, and us away."

Coroner Clark was the first to break the silence. "Stay here, Andy," he directed and motioned to Warfield to enter the secretary's office.

"Andy!" The chauffeur, about to occupy one of the hall chairs, looked up in surprise as I halted beside him. "Do you smoke?"

"No, sir; never. My wife can't stand the smell of tobacco."

"And what did Mr. Reade smoke?" My manner was urgent and Andy hurried his reply as Warfield called me.

"Cigars, mainly; but he always kept cigarettes, them with the Metropolitan Club's initials, for his guests who used cigarettes—"

I waited to hear no more, reaching the secretary's office in time to find Warfield looking down at the seated coroner. Clark unfolded the bloodstained marriage license.

"Close the door," he directed, and waited until I rejoined them. "You didn't really examine this license, Warfield," he began, "for Todd, the postman, came in at that moment. See, here"—with the reverse end of his gold pencil he pointed to a rubber-stamp across the writing in one corner of the marriage license. Clear and distinct was the one word "Cancelled."

CHAPTER VIII

The Alibis

WITH his eyes still glued to the marriage license, Inspector Warfield reached for the telephone on Claire Fechet's desk. The coroner and I maintained silence while he talked with first one official and then another at the City Court House.

"Well," Warfield replaced the telephone and drawing out his magnifying glass inspected the sheet of paper with the aid of the powerful lens. "Colonel Sims, in charge of the Marriage Bureau, tells me that Alfred Reade applied in person for this license on Saturday—he was unaccompanied." The inspector paused for comment, but Clark and I had nothing to say.

"Colonel Sims gave the license to Reade; from that moment he has not seen it and *at* that moment the paper did not bear the word 'Cancelled,' stamped upon it." Warfield pocketed his lens and leaning back, contemplated us. "Colonel Sims further stated that such a stamp as I describe is not used in his office."

"So the word 'Cancelled' is not there officially." The coroner touched the marriage license. "How it came on this paper, then, presents a very pretty problem." He glanced inquiringly at Warfield. "Does it touch upon the murder of Alfred Reade?"

Inspector Warfield sat back and scratched a puzzled head.

"To cancel means to render null and void," he said gravely. "The word, given here in the past tense, would seem to signify that the marriage between Reade and Christine de Peyster was not to take place. What transpired to upset Reade's matrimonial plans, we have yet to learn; we are not even sure he was aware of any change—"

"Hold!" exclaimed Clark. "Do you think this paper was placed in his hand after death? If so, you are wrong, for the license was held fast in his death grip. I used considerable force to extract it without tearing the paper, and such would not have been the case had it been placed between his fingers after death." He hesitated before adding, thoughtfully: "It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that Reade knew his marriage to Christine de Peyster would not come off."

"If he had a chance to read the word 'Cancelled,' before he was shot," broke in Warfield. "The word is stamped in one corner and not across the license. Obviously, Reade had just started to open his mail—remember, the second letter had the seal unbroken."

"You are taking it for granted that the marriage license came to Reade in that envelope." To emphasize my objection, I pointed to the three-cent commercial envelope which had been found lying empty by the dead man.

"I've told you once before that the paper fits the envelope," retorted Coroner Clark as Warfield, rising,

moved over to the door. I paid no attention to his whispered conversation with some one in the hall, centering my interest in what Clark was demonstrating with the document. "See, folded in the old crease it slips inside easily," and so saying he returned both the envelope and marriage license to his pocket.

"Were any finger prints on the document?"

"None. So Sergeant Meade, the finger-print expert, reported when he returned the papers to me." The coroner's tone matched his disgusted expression. "But, see here, Burton; if that envelope contained a letter or another communication of any kind, why wasn't it found in the room with the dead man?"

"Obviously the murderer might have carried it off—"

"Or Miss Fechet, before you got here, Mr. Burton." Warfield voiced the suggestion in a low tone, then swung back to the hall door as it opened and admitted Claire Fechet. "I fear you found waiting in the kitchen arduous—"

"No more so there than elsewhere." A sigh accompanied the words. "Why am I detained here, Mr. Warfield?" Her glance did not waver in its direct challenge, but her white cheeks and the lines under her eyes told plainly her mental agitation.

"Just a few more questions and you can go," responded the inspector. "We"—she declined the chair I proffered and Warfield frowned at the interruption. "We," he began again, "thought it would be easier for you to answer them here than at Police Headquarters."

Claire passed one nervous hand over the other. "What are they?"

Warfield consulted his notes. "You have already stated that you did not talk with Mr. Reade, nor hear him moving about." He glanced up. "But did you *see* him, Miss Fechet?"

"No." She barely breathed the monosyllable.

"How about this door?" he crossed the room and laid his hand on the communicating door between her office and the living room. "When you came in was it open or closed?"

"Closed."

"All the way?"

"I believe so—"

"I'm sure it was." My statement brought a swift look from her, gone before I could interpret its meaning.

"When *you* entered, Mr. Burton," Warfield's displeasure at my interruption faded quickly. "But Miss Fechet reached here first, and entered the house, using the only key available to the front door."

"Mr. Reade had one," she protested, quickly.

"Yes, and we found it upstairs in his trousers' pocket." The inspector drummed his fingers on the mahogany desk, the only sound save the girl's uneven breathing. "Why did Mr. Reade change the lock on his front door?"

She shrugged. "I don't know"—her white lips quivered, trembling into the semblance of a smile. "He didn't consult me."

It was the opening Warfield wished. "Did he consult you on other, more vital matters?" he questioned, bending forward in his eagerness. "On his prospective marriage with Christine de Peyster?"

For an instant she wavered, but for an instant only. "Mr. Reade was catholic in his tastes and indiscriminate in his attentions." She rested her hand on the back of a chair. "It was nothing new for him to contemplate matrimony, and gossip linked his name with that of Christine—" she swallowed hard—"even with mine, as the housekeeper kindly informed you."

Warfield blinked at the quick thrust. "We'll take that up later. Now, Miss Fechet, did gossip tell you that Reade applied on Saturday for a license to marry Miss de Peyster or did Reade impart that information?"

"Neither the one nor the other." The response was instant. "Nor did Miss de Peyster broach the subject to me."

Warfield ceased twirling his pipe and pocketed it unsmoked.

"Are you unaware that Reade applied on Saturday for such a license?" he demanded.

"Is it so?" Her eyes, big with wonder, stared at him. "He—they—might have told me." Warfield never removed his gaze, listening to her halting speech unmoved.

"So you had no knowledge of the license," he commented softly. "Were you equally ignorant of the fact that it had been cancelled?"

Claire's fingers twined about the slats of the ladder-back chair and braced it against her swaying figure.

"Cancelled?" She repeated the word dully. "Who cancelled it?"

The inspector evaded the question. "That's not so important as to *why* it was cancelled," he declared. "And did Reade's murderer know it?"

"His murderer—" The word fell from her palsied lips, while horror crept into her staring eyes; twice she tried to speak and failed. At the third attempt we just heard her and that was all. "Why—link it—them—together?"

For an interminable minute, Inspector Warfield watched Claire; then, with a skill born of experience, he switched his line of investigation.

"Why did you refuse to marry Joe Reade last night, Miss Fechet?" he asked, and his voice was honey-sweet.

Releasing her hold of the chair, the young girl staggered back against the wall. "What is that you say?" she gasped. "I—I—don't understand."

Warfield came closer and stood with head craned forward like some reptile, ready to strike.

"Did you refuse Joe Reade, hoping that, instead, you might marry his rich uncle?"

The question, flung at her, failed to divert her from that uppermost in her mind.

"Who told you that I had refused Joe? Who?" And reaching up, she clutched Warfield's coat and shook it.

"Mr. Joseph Reade himself."

If Warfield had struck Claire, she could not have shrunk from him more swiftly. With a moan she turned her face to the wall, but for a moment only; before I could even think of restoratives, much less find any, she turned and faced us.

"I have answered your questions, Inspector, to the best of my ability; now I claim the right of every American"—her low, exhausted tones were startling in contrast to her youth and beauty. "Once and for all, sir, I refuse to answer questions which might"—for the first time her voice faltered—"incriminate me."

Warfield straightened up and moved toward the door. "You may go, Miss Fechet; I'll not detain you longer."

With no recognition of our presence, Claire Fechet left us. I heard a murmur of voices in the hall, the front door open and close, and moving to the window, I was in time to see her walk down the street. She was still in view when Headquarters Detective Wilson hastened down the front steps and, turning in the same direction, sped after her.

Coroner Clark was the first to break the silence. "Poor devil!" He rubbed his hands together, whether from satisfaction or because they were sticky from the paste pot he had been clasping and unclasping, I could not tell. "The old, old story, Burton; money, love, jealousy—and a woman runs amuck."

Troubled in mind, I paced the floor. Claire Fechet had answered Inspector Warfield's questions under

pressure, perhaps, but candidly; so also had Mrs. Andy Grymes. She had not denied the housekeeper's charge that gossip linked Alfred Reade's name and hers; that he had planned to marry another, and that other, Claire's intimate friend, was also established by Colonel Sims' statement that Reade had appeared personally to apply for the license and by the bloodstained document in the dead man's hand. Who, then, had stamped "Cancelled" upon the license? Was it the same hand that fired the fatal shot?

Claire Fechet, to use Andy's words, had "the run of the house," from the moment that he, the chauffeur, on the night before, acting on Reade's orders, placed the front-door key in her hand. Thirteen and a half hours later, I had found her here alone and Reade lying dead in the next room.

"This way"— Inspector Warfield's voice sounded just outside the hall door; a second more and he entered followed by a sleepy-looking, bespeckled individual in a hastily donned policeman's uniform, judging from its creased appearance. "I'm sorry to have deprived you of your rest, Doyle, but your precinct captain reported that you walked this beat last night. You knew Mr. Reade by sight?"

"Sure, sir; I've been on this beat for over a year, now; but this is my first stretch on the night shift." Doyle smoothed down his coat and buttoned it. "I've always found Mr. Reade a pleasant-spoken gentleman except," he hesitated, "except when the boys in the

neighborhood scaled the wall to his garden. He couldn't bear no one to set foot inside it."

"Ah, why not?"

"Mr. Reade said he had valuable plants there, sir, and a wonderful turf; it was what you might call his hobby." His coat and collar straightened to his satisfaction, Doyle appeared more at ease. "I heard him cussing out Andy on Saturday night for not cutting the grass to his liking."

"And did Andy take kindly to the lecture?" questioned Warfield.

Doyle chuckled. "To his face he did, but later, when we walked down the block he called Mr. Reade a lot o' names; said he was a cheap skate, a four-flusher an'—an' a skirt-chaser." Doyle looked about to make sure he was not overheard. "Andy said he was goin' to quit."

Warfield eyed the policeman keenly. "Did he give notice, do you know?"

"An' lose his good wages, with the luck he has at cards?" Doyle grinned. "Gamblin's the breath o' life to Andy, an' where'd he git the money to squander if he quit Mr. Reade—an' his wife?" The latter was obviously an afterthought. "No siree, Andy knew on which side his bread was buttered, an' he'd a stood for anything from Mr. Reade—save bein' fired."

"An obliging chauffeur," remarked the inspector dryly. "Well, what about last night, Doyle; anything unusual happen on your beat?"

Doyle shook his head. "No, sir; things is most al-

ways quiet in this business section on Sundays and holidays." He waited and cleared his throat. "There wasn't any lights goin' in this house, nor any sign o' life till Mr. Reade came home just after midnight." Doyle shifted his cap from hand to hand in some embarrassment. "Mr. Reade was kinda short in his 'Good night,' when I spoke to him, an' that surprised me."

"Did any one accompany Mr. Reade into the house?" persisted Warfield, his manner waxing impatient.

"He was alone when he went in that door," and Doyle, stepping toward the hall, by his finger indicated the front entrance. "That I'll take my dying oath to. No one, man or woman, came into this house with Mr. Reade."

Warfield stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Were there any signs of life about the house after Mr. Reade got home?"

"None, except for his center light on the third floor, an' that only burned an hour—or less."

"You saw it extinguished?" and Doyle, surprised by my sudden part in his questioning, turned partly in my direction and blinked as the light from the window by which I stood, shone fully on his heavy-lensed spectacles.

"It was out when I circled the block at three A.M.," he responded concisely. "An' this house was silent as a tomb till Charlie Todd rang the bell an' delivered the morning mail to Mr. Reade."

"How did you know any mail was left here this

morning?" I asked, leaving my perch by the window.

"I was passing on my way off duty an' saw Charlie standing inside the vestibule; he came down a moment or so later an' we walked up the street to the Alamo, his next port o' call." Doyle tried to stifle a yawn with a hand the size of Providence, and Warfield addressed him hastily.

"Do you know a Miss Claire Fechet, Reade's secretary?" he asked.

"Sure; the pretty young gal who lives at Studio House." Doyle brightened. "I used to meet her frequent comin' an' goin' to work when I was on day shift—"

"Did you see her this morning about twenty-five minutes past eight o'clock?" demanded Warfield quickly.

Doyle gave a negative shake of his head. "I was home by that time—"

"Then earlier?" persisted the inspector, his speech quickening. "Was she in this locality any time after midnight and up to the time you went off duty?"

"What do ye mean by 'this locality'?" Doyle asked, puzzled. "She lives on this same block, but on the street to the south. I seen her there, comin' back with young Mr. Reade 'round midnight, when I was close to Studio House."

"You spoke to her?"

Doyle grinned. "Not me. I could see neither was interested, 'cept in each other; so I just stepped along me beat an' minded me own business."

Warfield tapped on the desk with his pencil. "You mean they were loverlike in their attitude?"

"Well," Doyle hesitated. "Young Reade had a hitch-holt of her arm, an' was a-talkin' mighty earnest, with his mouth close to her ear an' she was walkin' with her head bent down—so I drew me own conclusions—I've courted in me time."

"Oh, go home and go to bed," directed Warfield, good-naturedly. "The coroner will notify you when the inquest meets," and Doyle, expressing voluble thanks, disappeared in the hall.

Coroner Clark rose and stretched his cramped legs. "Doyle gave us some interesting side lights," he remarked, coming from behind the desk, as Warfield picked up the telephone. He said no more until the inspector had completed his call. "So all was not harmonious in the Reade ménage after all, as Mrs. Andy and her husband gave me to understand when I took them to the restaurant at the corner just now. I judged him to be of a quarrelsome nature from the looks he cast at his wife when he thought she wasn't looking."

Warfield regarded the coroner with interest. "Anything else strike you about that ill-assorted pair?" he asked, and Clark, making for the next room, halted.

"One thing." He paused and adjusted his eyeglasses. "Mrs. Andy said they had left Rosewood without stopping for breakfast, yet, when the food I ordered for them came, they had apparently lost their appetites, for most of it went untasted."

Our puzzled silence was broken by Warfield. "You heard part of my talk with the Washington Central and with the long distance operator," he began, slowly, choosing his words with care. "Both office operators assure me that a call went from this house to Rosewood at seven this morning—this record, to which the telephone officials are ready to swear, gentlemen, establishes the Grymes' alibis."

CHAPTER IX

The Painted Lady

STILL pondering Inspector Warfield's announcement, I silently followed him into the living room where Coroner Clark had preceded us. The place, unchanged in any way, except for the removal of the dead man, seemed charged with the somber horror of the crime committed there so short a time before. The atmosphere was not conducive to raising my spirits.

Taking his stand by the table near which we had found Reade, Coroner Clark beckoned to us to approach closer. "I waited for you to be present, Warfield, when I opened this," he explained, picking up the registered letter addressed to Reade. With care he slit the flap and drew out the envelope's bulky contents. With equal care he displayed the brief typed note, signed by an official of the Metropolis Trust Company, and which stated that sent therein, was the stock purchased by Reade. Eagerly we inspected the latter.

"Negotiable securities worth five thousand dollars," remarked Warfield, looking across at me. "That explodes any theory that robbery was the motive for the murder."

"Unless the burglar was scared away before he could rob the dead man—"

"By whom—Miss Fechet?" Warfield shrugged. "She claims to have reached here forty minutes after Reade was murdered. In that forty minutes a burglar could have swiped this envelope, rushed upstairs and stolen his bill fold lying conspicuously on his chest of drawers, and which contained five hundred and fifty-two dollars in cash, and the valuable diamond stick pin, lying alongside, and still made his get-away."

"And if a burglar murdered Reade, how did he gain entrance?" demanded Clark. "No lock has been picked, no window jimmied open. That garden door"—pointing to it—"and the small side door, the servants' entrance, were found locked and bolted on the *inside.* And no key to the front door available save two—Reade's own key, which we found upstairs in his trousers' pocket, and the other in Miss Fechet's possession."

Claire Fechet—always Claire Fechet! Angrily I turned and surveyed the living room, an involuntary act practically unnecessary, for every object there was indelibly impressed upon my mind during my earlier visits. After an instant's hesitation, I hurried over to the flat-top desk at the far end of the room. It was a handsome piece of furniture, and the revolving chair, matching it, gave additional evidence of Reade's extravagant tastes and his desire for material comfort. But it was not the desk's workmanship nor the ornaments on its glass-covered top which claimed my undivided attention. Dropping on one knee, I peered down at the oriental rug on which it stood.

"Look here," I called, and the two men were instantly by my side. "You can see, Warfield, though it is barely visible to the naked eye, that the nap of this rug is rubbed the wrong way by some object having been dragged or pushed across it. Here"—and on my hands and knees I circled the desk—"the same marks show that this piece of furniture has been pushed back in this corner, and recently. It must have been since the rugs were swept or vacuumed."

Warfield, who had followed my every movement, stood up.

"You are right," he acknowledged. "But does that get us anywhere, Mr. Burton?"

I rose to my feet. "If the desk stood there, toward the center of the room, where the trail in the nap ends, it would have been a convenient hiding place. From its shelter, whoever shot Reade could have pounced in front of him with one long leap before he could have realized he was not alone in this room."

I waited in vain for comment. Both my companions were equally silent.

"You must acknowledge," I went on, with some heat, "that the murder must have been committed by a person having the dead man's entire confidence or by a complete stranger to him."

Coroner Clark adjusted his eyeglasses after polishing them. "For the sake of argument, let's agree it was a stranger. And a particularly agile stranger it must have been, to have sprung from the spot where

you claim he hid, to land undetected in front of Reade."

"The latter was engrossed in his mail."

"Perhaps so, Mr. Burton," continued Clark slowly. "The stranger must have had considerable strength to have pushed that heavy piece of furniture down to where it now stands; a clever bit of camouflage"—he wagged his head—"but not feasible. Why, sir, if he sprang toward him with the automatic pointed, the bullet would have penetrated the left side of Reade's head."

"He might have been on his way toward the door, hoping to pass Reade undetected . . ." I stopped, as Clark shook his head.

"And had Reade looked up and around, the bullet would have pierced his head at a different angle and have struck the wall further down the room." The coroner demonstrated his argument by advancing to the wall and running his pencil from the bullet hole to the right of the death chair. "No, no, Mr. Burton, your first contention is correct—Reade must have been murdered by some one in whom he placed confidence—some one, judging from his scanty attire, with whom he was intimately acquainted."

"And from that list of intimates you can eliminate Mr. and Mrs. Andy Grymes," added Inspector Warfield softly. "Reade phoned to them at seven this morning, he was killed at a quarter of eight; they could not have motored here from Rosewood under an hour, even traveling at top speed."

I considered his statement in puzzled silence. "Suppose they did not both go to Rosewood—and, instead, one of them stayed here all night—"

Warfield interrupted me thoughtfully. "Granting that either Mrs. Andy or her husband remained behind, unknown to Reade, where did he or she spend the night?" he demanded. "No bed was occupied except Reade's, no room gives any indication of harboring a man or woman for that length of time."

My uplifted hand checked him. "Mrs. Andy is a trained housekeeper; otherwise a man as fastidious as Reade would not have kept her in his employ. If she stayed, she had time to remake her bed and freshen the appearance of each and every room."

Warfield hesitated. "There is something in that," he admitted, and walked behind the desk. "But after killing Reade, how did she leave the house without being seen?" His manner became more serious. "At eight o'clock there were people passing in the streets."

"Ah, but did they realize then the significance of her leaving the house at that hour?"

He smiled at my impetuous interruption. "The District Attorney gave out the news to the press when you were waiting in Mrs. Andy's room upstairs. Washington will be agog presently. If she was seen then, we will soon hear of it."

What he said was true, but I stuck to my views. "Your argument that the murderer could not have left the house without being seen at that hour by people in the street, applies equally as well to my theory that

a complete stranger killed Reade, as it does to yours that an intimate acquaintance committed the crime. How did he or she get away from here?"

"Ask me something easy," groaned Clark. "Unless," and his expression brightened, "unless the criminal never left here." He met my stare with an ironic smile. "You found Miss Fechet on the premises, remember."

Lacking a rejoinder, I moved about the room. I *had* found Claire Fechet on my arrival and her face rose once again before my mental vision. I had noted then her unusual pallor. What had robbed her cheeks of the natural rosy hue of youth? Knowledge that a dead man lay in the next room? Knowledge of the crime itself?

Warfield noticed my abstraction. "What's wrong?" he asked, and, jamming my hands in my pockets, I faced about.

"I am wondering why you have not questioned the person most vitally interested in Reade's death—Christine de Peyster."

The inspector considered me carefully, and then his eyes shifted to Clark. Quickly the latter replied to the mute question, and with tart emphasis.

"Miss de Peyster's telephone is out of order, temporarily, and her doorbell remains unanswered; that, Mr. Burton, is the reason why we linger here."

"Not unprofitably, I hope." And Warfield seated himself in Reade's chair and with the aid of the dead man's keys, commenced unlocking the drawers of his

desk, a task which brought Coroner Clark across the room.

Watching over their shoulders, I saw unearthed the usual collection of papers to be found in a rich man's desk. Cancelled checks, receipted bills, a variegated assortment of odds and ends, theater programs, dinner invitations, invitations of a less formal character, business correspondence, begging letters from charitable institutions and from needy individuals, and letters of a more personal nature from men and women. Unerringly Warfield picked out those which he deemed worthy of a second reading and placed them in an upper drawer.

He also unearthed a choice accumulation of pictures —famous stage beauties, chorus girls, in all manner of dress, and women of fashion; some bore names printed upon them, others were autographed, in varying terms of endearment.

"Inspector!" So absorbed were we in Reade's picture gallery that the policeman's voice came to us shrilly in the silence. "Officer Mayers just sent word, sir, that he's sure some one is inside Miss de Peyster's house, although no one will open the front door. Shall he force his way in?"

"Heavens, no; not without a warrant." Warfield rose in haste. "I'll go right over. Here, put everything back under lock and key"—and he thrust Reade's papers and photographs, not yet sorted, into an empty compartment of the bottom drawer. Making sure that the latter was securely fastened, he hesitated. "How

about you, Dr. Clark? Will you remain in charge until I return?"

"Certainly, Warfield; but don't be longer than you have to." The coroner consulted his watch. "I've made plans to hold the inquest at five o'clock."

"Good." Warfield handed the desk keys to Clark. "Go through Reade's correspondence, if you have an opportunity." He reached for his hat. "Coming, Mr. Burton?"

"In just a moment." Opening my cigarette case, I exposed the solitary Dimitrino. "Your brand, doctor?"

The coroner's eyes lit on the cigarette, and his grave face relaxed into a smile. "Thanks for the compliment, Burton; but my humble wants are satisfied with less expensive smokes."

I pushed my cigarette case across the desk. "Keep the Dimitrino, doctor, for some one using that brand must have been in the housekeeper's study upstairs between midnight and the hour when we went there this morning. I found this cigarette lying between the window and the copper-wire screen. You will note that it is unstained, fresh, which would not be the case had it lain in the window before midnight, at which time the rain of the early evening ceased."

His interest awakened, Coroner Clark placed the Dimitrino in an envelope taken from the brass desk rack and put it with the other objects found in the death chamber, but his evident desire to question me further was checked by a call to the telephone in the next room. Anxious to catch up with Inspector War-

field, who had not waited, I reached for my cigarette case, which Clark had left on the desk. It rested in front of an old daguerreotype of a woman—Reade's mother, from the family likeness. The daguerreotype, standing open and balanced only by the two sides of the case, slipped on the glass top as my extended hand bumped against it, skidded across the desk and fell with a thud at my feet.

Picking it up, I stared aghast—where the quaint likeness of his mother had been was blank glass. Still staring downward at it, something white on the rug beneath caught my eye. Stooping over I snatched up the small oval and reversed it; there looked back at me from the colored photograph, miniature in size, a face of alluring beauty.

In sheer bewilderment, I slipped the painted likeness in my coat pocket, and with my hands thus freed, examined the daguerreotype, pulling the case open as far as it would go. My groping fingers tugged hard on the left side, pressing on the small metal catch which protruded from it. Released, the outer casing dropped back and disclosed a center partition, in which, back to back, was the likeness of Reade's mother and the empty glass. Within this recess, evidently, he kept the likeness of the painted lady. I put the daguerreotype back on the desk where it stood originally, with his mother's picture exposed to view. Even close observation gave no hint that the plush-covered case contained dual places for the old-time pictures.

Loud voices in the next room distracted my atten-

tion and I hastened there just as Charlie Todd, the postman, came into the hall.

"What'll I do with this noon mail?" he questioned, as Coroner Clark left the telephone. "It's addressed to Mr. Reade."

"Leave it with me." Clark took the package and ran over the envelopes, speaking to me at the same time. "Warfield wishes you to join him at Studio House, Burton."

I caught up my hat and started for the front door with alacrity. "Which direction do I go?" I called over my shoulder and was answered by Todd, who was just behind me.

"I've some mail for Miss de Peyster, and if you are not in a great hurry—" he paused as Andy Grymes came from the back hall and hurried up to him. "No; no mail to-day."

But Andy did not drop back. "Anything for Ann?" he asked, and I was disagreeably impressed by something furtive in his manner—or was it his sidelong glance about the hall before he put the question with lowered breath?

"She has her mail, never fear," retorted Todd cheerfully, and he grinned into the chauffeur's scowling face. The latter blocked his way.

"Where'd you meet Ann?" he demanded.

"At the Alamo." With unabated good humor, Todd circled around Andy, but not quickly enough to avoid his detaining hand.

"Did she really get any mail?" he asked, and his

tone had grown wheedling. "Honest, Mister Charlie, did she?"

"Ask her," Todd advised over his shoulder and, shaking loose, ran down the front steps. I was still in the vestibule, however, when Coroner Clark came into the hall and spotted Andy, thereby nipping his evident intention of following us outside.

Todd waited for me to catch up, and shoulder to shoulder we hurried up the street. I noticed the narrow asphalt walk which led to the iron door of the side entrance of the Reade mansion; then we passed the big office building on the adjoining lot. There Todd stopped to deliver mail. His pack was considerably lighter when we reached the end of the block and he again turned left and down a street that paralleled the one on which stood Reade's old home.

"Where is Reade's garage?" I asked, as Todd sorted his mail for the next house.

"Two blocks over," and he indicated the direction. "Strange, Mr. Reade didn't save some land on which to build his own," he continued. "Instead, all had to be given over to his garden, and he buys a two-car garage nowhere convenient to his home."

"So he had two cars—"

"No, sir, he hadn't . . ." Todd doffed his cap, as a woman ran down from her doorway and took her mail. "Only one car and him with all the money in the world." He sighed. "That's the way things go, sir; and Andy complaining because of too much work."

"Didn't Reade drive himself?"

"Never, sir." Todd dived deep into his bag and drew out a handful of letters. "What's that you ask? I didn't catch it, sir?"

"Does Mrs. Andy drive Reade's car?"

Todd came to a full stop before a long, low, stone house, ivy-covered, with gabled roof and diamond-paned windows. In the picturesque front door stood Inspector Warfield and another, a younger man. What the former called to me and what reply Todd made to my question were both drowned in a wailing, piercing siren, which echoed up and down the thoroughfare. The warning sent pedestrians scurrying to the sidewalks—all save one. Claire Fechet, caught midway in crossing the street, cast a terrified look toward the advancing hook and ladder and the Fire Chief's car. Veering about, she hesitated for one fatal instant; the next, plunging blindly ahead, she slipped and fell in the path of the speeding fire truck.

Dimly aware of grinding, shrieking brakes, and the hoarse shouts of spectators, I cleared the intervening space at top speed. A breath-taking effort and I shoved Claire to one side as the huge, unwieldy car thundered past. A jutting ladder side-swiped me, and my head and the pavement came in violent contact. . . . A thousand stars blazed before my eyes, and I knew no more.

"S-s-s-s-h! He's coming to."

I heard the words without taking in their sense; also heard the movement of people in the room, but it was more comfortable to lie still and not attempt to reason

the why and the wherefore of my whereabouts. Feebly I resisted the efforts of others to make me swallow, but as the fiery stimulant trickled down my throat, it put new life in my veins and somewhat cleared my brain.

My first attempt to look about sent shooting pains through my head, and I closed my eyes quickly, to open them again five minutes later and lie staring upward. Slowly it penetrated my consciousness that my surroundings were strange, although in the murmur of voices, which grew louder one minute and sank away the next, I recognized Inspector Warfield's nasal tones and Todd's heavier bass.

With an effort which hurried my breathing, I lifted my hands and touched my head; the encircling bandages startled me and I tried to sit up. Soft hands upon my shoulder restrained me and my gaze, diverted from the beamed ceiling, shifted to the woman bending over my couch. With mouth agape I stared at her in paralyzed silence—feature for feature, coloring matching coloring—she was the living likeness of the painted photograph.

Weakly I dropped back upon the soft pillows and closed my eyes. When I again opened them she was still within my line of vision, talking to some one whom I believe she addressed as doctor. What they said interested me not at all and I lay quiet, husbanding my strength. My coat had not been removed. With infinite pains I extracted the painted photograph which I had found secreted in the back of the daguerreotype

on Reade's desk and carried off in my pocket for further examination. Another rest was required before I found strength to study the painted face—save its lack of animation, it was startling in its resemblance to the woman, slender and of medium height, standing by the open window. The sunlight fell softly upon her arms and neck, exquisite in shape and color, and her small, patrician head. Her eyes, deep blue, with long, curling lashes, needed no artificial penciling to enhance their beauty. Her hair was almost black, and the forehead beneath it ivory white.

My eyes dropped again to the painted photograph; beneath it was something in Reade's handwriting. The lettering was small in this case, and hard for me to decipher, but as my blurred vision cleared, I conned the words over and over.

"Mr. Burton, sir, I'm glad you're no worse." My fingers closed spasmodically over the small photograph and slipped it beneath my pillow as Todd came close to me. "Miss Fechet's unhurt, save for a bruise or two and the wits scared out of her."

My look must have betrayed my feelings, for Todd patted my shoulder encouragingly, then stooped down to catch my whispered question.

"Where are you? In Studio House," he explained, and, as I pointed to the woman by the window: "Why, she's none other than Miss Christine de Peyster."

From sheer weakness I closed my eyes as my befuddled wits tried to grasp his statement—she, Reade's

fiancée, she, Christine de Peyster! Not so had Reade designated her on the painted photograph—his descriptive words beneath her likeness ran through my teeming brain—*"Beautiful White Devil."*

CHAPTER X

In Studio House

THE bang of a distant door, the rush of feet and a wild, excited voice startled me, as they did the others in the room, for there was a concerted movement toward what, I later learned, was the servants' quarters of the cottage.

"Miss Chris, dear, an' have ye heard the news?" A stout Irishwoman burst through the portières in whirlwind fashion. Her momentum carried her to my couch. "Misther Reade's bin done to death by some murtherin' devil!"

"Hush!" Christine de Peyster's cautioning gesture indicated me. "These gentlemen have told me, Norah. Go and prepare the guest room for Mr. Burton."

Norah's surprise was equal to mine. Instead of obeying, she stood rooted to the spot, while her eyes, half bulging from their sockets, rolled toward me as I struggled to sit erect, and then fastened on her mistress a look hard to translate.

"I must go." I spoke mechanically and halted, surprised by the weakness of my voice. My hostess gave me no opportunity to say more.

"I cannot permit Marian Martin's brother to leave my roof, injured as he is." Her low, rich voice capti-

vated the ear. She came closer, dropping down in a chair beside me. "I assure you, Mr. Burton, Claire and I will do our small best to make you comfortable."

I mumbled something—what, I do not know—and signaled urgently for Warfield to speak for me.

"Your idea is excellent, Miss de Peyster," he announced, and met my startled stare with bland guilelessness. Had he willfully misunderstood my meaning? "Mr. Burton is not injured badly enough for hospitalization, but he should not live alone in his sister's apartment."

"A trained nurse could look after Burton's wants there." The suggestion came from the fifth person in the room and, turning my head slightly, I regarded him with a more lively interest. Snapping shut his black bag with an air of finality, he straightened his thin figure. "I'll call the nurses' registry, Chris."

"You will not!" Her imperious tone checked all argument. "Norah is nurse enough; if she needs assistance," she glanced up at him, half commanding, half beseeching, "you will come at our call."

His swarthy skin turned a deeper tint, even as he strove to ignore the fascination of her manner. "You take much for granted, Chris," he grumbled, bending over to feel my pulse. "Since no one introduces us formally, Burton, I'll mention that my name is Wyant, Tom Wyant, Senator Martin's physician. Both he and his wife asked me to look after you. For the next few days why not come to my apartment at the Alamo?"

"I was there this morning," I blurted out, and won-

dered at the flash in his somber eyes. "When Miss Fechet sought your aid."

Wyant's fingers tightened their hold on my wrist. "I am not always where I should be," he muttered, and his eyes traveled back to the woman sitting motionless by his side. Swiftly he changed the topic. "You've had a narrow escape, Burton, and you are in no shape to talk—much less argue. Lie still, now; Miss de Peyster has settled your destiny—for the present."

But far from satisfied, I turned restlessly and encountered Norah's fixed stare; judging from her attitude she was no more pleased with the arrangement than I, but unlike me, she voiced her objections aloud.

"If ye plaze, Miss Chris, an' where be ye goin' to place your aunt whin she comes from home?" she asked, her manner that of a privileged servant. "An' have ye stopped to think av that?"

"I think only that you forget *your* place, Norah; do as you are told." The reproof, spoken in the same soft voice which, earlier, had fascinated me, held a note of authority not to be denied and, crimsoning to the roots of her hair, the maid withdrew. There was an uncomfortable pause, broken by Wyant.

"I'll stop a second and see Claire," he announced, moving away from my couch. "She is in a highly nervous state and—"

"I will go with you." Christine de Peyster was on her feet and halfway across the room before Wyant had gained that distance.

Involuntarily my eyes followed his awkward, stoop-

ing figure and her graceful, upright carriage; the contrast did not stop there, for I judged Wyant to be in his forties, while Christine could not have passed her thirtieth birthday. She was the first through the door; Wyant, a second later, closed it and thereby barred Inspector Warfield's attempt to accompany them.

Feeling stronger, I sat up on my elbow and took a more human interest in my surroundings. Quickly I noted the size of the long, oak-beamed room, which was also paneled in the same wood, colored a richer, deeper shade from time. Diamond-leaded French windows opened upon the stone terrace and the garden beyond, while other doors of solid oak indented the walls at different angles. To my right, as I rested on the couch, I saw a handsome refectory table; evidently the room served for dining purposes as well as living quarters, and a door, before which stood a curious four-paneled Chinese screen, I took to lead to the pantry or possibly the kitchen. Lovely old furniture, statuary, and oil portraits lent a charm impossible to describe, as did the gigantic fire irons on the hearth of the great stone chimney. On the hearthstones still glowed the dying embers of a fire, and as no radiators marred the simple, harmonious setting of a bygone age, I concluded the room was dependent for heat upon the wood fire.

"You are in luck, Mr. Burton." Warfield planted himself in the chair left vacant by Christine. "I thought you a goner—"

"How long ago was it?" I broke in hurriedly, glad

of the opportunity to talk with him without the presence of others.

"An hour or more; you were some time regaining your senses, and since then we've left you to yourself." He dragged his chair closer so that he almost whispered in my ear. "We used Miss Fechet's door key to bring you here—"

"For which I do not thank you," I retorted hotly. "My sister's apartment was only around the block, or, at worst, a hospital."

He brushed my words aside without comment and hurried his speech. "Miss de Peyster says she heard our entry from upstairs, but I swear some one was peeping from behind the curtains of a window and saw the whole affair." He fingered my pillow with restless touch. "If she was not alone in the house, why lie about it?"

"Ask her."

He made a wry face. "You might as well interview a dancing dervish! I've tried to pin her down, but she's here, there and everywhere; and that confounded doctor, always bobbing up." He looked at me queerly. "I was standing yonder, struggling to get help," he indicated the telephone across the room, "when pop, there was Wyant at my elbow."

"Perhaps Miss Fechet summoned him."

"She never left your side." If Warfield observed my uncontrollable start, he was too decent to comment upon it. Burrowing deeper among my pillows I was vastly relieved by his next remark. "I am glad Wyant

is looking after you, Mr. Burton; his reputation as a surgeon is national."

"I wasn't impressed by his manners—" I stopped as the man under discussion came up to us. That Wyant was displeased over something was manifested by his angry tones.

"I told you before, Inspector Warfield, that Mr. Burton requires quiet, and the instant my back is turned, you disturb him with your chatter. Come, sir; don't you think it is time you left?"

A flush darkened Warfield's cheeks, but otherwise he showed no rancor at the physician's manner.

"Presently, doctor, presently." He pointed to a chair close at hand. "You attended Alfred Reade professionally; that's right, please sit down. Miss Fechet—"

Watching from my couch, I saw Wyant's hand close tightly over the chair as he lowered himself slowly into its upholstered depths.

"Miss Fechet told you that, Inspector?" he asked and his voice was calmer, impersonal.

"Oh—ah—I inferred it." Warfield drew out his inevitable pipe and tobacco pouch. "When did you last see Reade?"

"Professionally, do you mean, or as a friend?" Wyant tossed a match box to the inspector, which the latter caught in his lap.

"In both capacities." He cupped his hand about his pipe and poured in the tobacco and stole a look across at the physician as the pause lengthened, to find him

regarding carefully the pattern of the rug in front of my couch.

"Reade enjoyed excellent health lately," explained Wyant, aroused by the scratch of Warfield's match along the box-edge. "So professionally I was not needed. However, we have mutual friends," his eyes, deep-set under shaggy white brows, rested on Christine de Peyster, as the latter approached and, motioning to both men to keep their seats, perched herself on an ottoman; "and we met frequently in other people's homes—" he shifted his attention to Warfield. "Reade was a queer mixture—he spent money lavishly to gratify his whims, but begrudged it to his own flesh and blood."

"You refer to his nephew, Joe Reade?" questioned Warfield, swiftly. "Ah, yes, you took the latter's part when his uncle turned him out."

"And who wouldn't?" Wyant's speech quickened defensively, or so it appeared to me, although none of us had implied criticism by look or manner. Secure in the knowledge that the three people were too interested in each other to bother with me, I gazed openly at Wyant—and as I watched him, I realized I had been too hasty in my judgment—the broad forehead, the wide, humorous mouth, the thoughtful eyes—all bespoke a man studiously inclined, of generous impulses, and of ability of a high order.

"Reade's quarrel with Joe was like other of his acts, bizarre in its pettiness, because the lad borrowed a front door key—bah!"

From behind his cloud of tobacco smoke, I could see that Warfield's eyes never left Wyant. "So bizarre, doctor, I'm wondering if it didn't cover some other motive?" he suggested softly. "Perhaps Reade resented young Joe's attentions to his pretty secretary, Miss Fechet."

I would have given much for a drink of water, for my mouth had grown dry; my discomfort was mental as well as physical. Had not the policeman on Reade's beat inferred that Claire and Joe were lovers? But by Joe's own statement, Claire had refused to marry him and that, only the night before!

"On the other hand," went on the inspector reflectively, as neither Christine nor Wyant vouchsafed an answer to his former suggestion, "perhaps the run of his house gave young Joe an opportunity to see the attentions his uncle paid Miss Fechet." He paused and glanced speculatively at his companions; save that she stirred slightly, Christine heard him without outward emotion; Wyant, on the contrary, was regarding Warfield in open indignation. "Perhaps that was distasteful to Reade and he picked a quarrel with his nephew, using as a pretext a trivial subject."

Wyant's harsh laugh broke the silence. "You've missed your vocation, Warfield; romances should have engaged your attention." He sprang up with a movement so swift, it startled Warfield to his feet. "Mr. Reade's sudden death is deplorable—horrible. As to the motive inspiring his murder—" He stopped and his glance swept over us, and rested on Christine, sit-

ting with face averted. "Why not consult those who knew Reade intimately?"

"Who, besides his nephew and Miss Fechet, comes under that category, doctor?" asked Warfield quickly; his glance never leaving the silent woman on the ottoman.

Wyant turned toward the front of the house. "Mrs. Andy—perhaps." Suddenly his tones grew menacing. "Remember this, Warfield; Miss Fechet is not to be disturbed by any one to-night." And the front door closed behind his retreating figure.

So interested had I become in the rapid dialogue that I had sat up and pivoted around so as not to miss any of it. Christine was instantly by my couch, and her hand touched my shoulder.

"You must do as the doctor ordered," she cautioned, and I grew aware of the delicate perfume she used. Obediently I dropped back among my pillows and from their soft shelter I stared upward into her face—a face untouched by cosmetics. The transparent pallor of her skin sent a chill to my heart; did it bespeak ill health or a night and a day of horror?

"Just a moment, Miss de Peyster." Inspector Warfield pushed forward a chair invitingly. "I want a chat with you."

"Later—Mr. Burton needs quiet."

"Our conversation will not disturb him; see, he is dropping off to sleep." I had a second before closed my eyes, a sudden giddiness making the objects before me whirl about in maddening circles. Warfield spoke

with stern directness. "Come, Miss de Peyster; you cannot avoid me longer."

"What nonsense!" She accepted the chair mechanically. "There is enough real tragedy without turning it into melodrama, Mr. Warfield. What is it you wish to know?"

"Why didn't you answer your front-door bell, all this morning?"

The blunt question opened my eyes and I studied the pair so close to my couch and yet, in their earnestness, forgetful of my proximity.

"Norah left immediately after breakfast to go to Center Market." Christine leaned back more at ease and faced her questioner. "I spent the time in my studio on the floor above."

"All of that time?" and skepticism was plainly discernible in the inspector's voice.

"I was absorbed in my work." Her smile was very engaging. "And the knocker on my front door does not disturb me when I am there—which is the reason it was left on the door and the electric bell removed when I inherited this property."

Warfield considered her words carefully. "You went to the theater with Alfred Reade last night?" he asked.

"Yes, to the National."

"And after that, Miss de Peyster?"

"We had supper at the Carlton."

"Alone?"

"Yes." Christine changed color. "We did not remain there long; I was not feeling well and—"

"Did you see Dr. Wyant on your return?"

"Dr. Wyant here then! He said nothing of it—this —this afternoon." For one fateful instant she was off guard; then her nerves steadied and she faced Warfield unperturbed.

I had not taken my eyes off Christine, attracted by her unusual personality. Her face was one of great power, whether for good or evil depended upon her mood—or so I interpreted the fleeting expression of a second before—if looks could have marred, Warfield would not have escaped uninjured. I glanced across at the inspector, to find him settled back in his chair, apparently determined to spend the remainder of the afternoon in Christine's company.

Christine was the first to break the protracted pause.

"Come, Inspector Warfield, cannot you postpone these questions? I see no point to them."

He shook his head. "Sorry, but—"

"I must ask to be excused." I gathered from Christine's intonation that she seldom failed to carry her point with utter disregard of any obstacle that lay in the path of her desires.

"On what grounds?" smoothly.

"Those of humanity." So totally unexpected was her reply, that Warfield stared. "Must I remind you," with a sudden burst of passionate feeling, "that Alfred Reade's murder"—the sinister word was spoken halt-

ingly—"has taken from me a—a—neighbor—a good neighbor—one whom I—esteemed."

"Is that all?" Warfield's hand reached out along the chair arm and imprisoned hers. I doubt if she was even conscious of his act, she sat so still, so breathless. "Was that your warmest sentiment for Alfred Reade?"

"You grow impertinent!" With flaming cheeks, Christine regarded Warfield. "My personal affairs are no concern of yours."

"Except in so far as they touch Alfred Reade," retorted the inspector, his composure unshaken by her furious glance.

The sound of shuffling feet came to us distinctly and Warfield looked up; his frown faded as Coroner Clark advanced, admitted by a scowling Norah.

"Ah; you got my message to come over," he exclaimed. "Miss de Peyster, this is Coroner Clark. I only ask that you see us for a moment or so longer," as, bowing, she started to leave. "Dr. Clark has a document which," his gaze stayed steadily upon her, "concerns you."

The coroner instantly took his cue. From his pocket he extracted the bloodstained paper and held it down by his side.

"In such fashion we found it clutched in Reade's dying grasp," he explained, as, fascinated, Christine followed his every movement. "Have you seen this document before, madam?" and he spread it out, printed form uppermost.

With eyes shielded by her hand, upon which rested

her head as she leaned her weight on her elbow, Christine glanced swiftly at the marriage license and then at her two companions.

"Certainly I have seen it," she acknowledged, and her lips twitched, whether from contempt or from far different emotions, it was impossible to tell. "Did you gentlemen expect me to deny a document which so vitally touched my future?"

Her question was ignored. "Did you see it in Reade's possession?" demanded Warfield sternly.

"Surely; he showed it to me."

"Then it never left Reade's possession?" An eager note in his voice betrayed to her keen perceptions the importance the inspector attached to her answer.

"By the word 'possession,' do you mean his person or his house?" she asked, and Warfield hesitated.

"Both," he admitted and leaned closer, until his shoulder touched hers. She did not stir.

"Not having the gift of divination, it is impossible to answer you, Mr. Warfield." Her deep blue eyes sparkled with hidden fires. "If Mr. Reade left the paper at home or if he kept it about his person, I cannot tell; except"—for the first time she faltered—"you gentlemen have told me that it was within his reach before—he died."

Warfield drew back, his chagrin manifest. "He didn't leave the license with you?"

"No." Her denial carried conviction and Warfield and the coroner exchanged glances; it was the latter who broke the pause.

"Had the date been set for your marriage, Miss de Peyster?" he asked.

"No." She considered him with a swift, sidelong look. "Mr. Reade assured me that the license was good for thirty days."

Coroner Clark fidgeted in his seat. Quizzing a woman of her social standing, her wealth and beauty, did not often fall his way, and he was growing more and more ill at ease.

"Pardon so personal a question," he began. "But how long were you and Mr. Reade engaged?"

"We were never engaged." Had Christine exploded a bomb before them, the two men could not have appeared more taken aback. I, too, sat up—all pretense at slumber forgotten.

"Then—then—this license—" and Clark extended the paper; it shook slightly in his grasp as his rising excitement affected his usually phlegmatic temperament.

"Was the result of a wager at dinner Friday night." She sat forward, about to rise, as the inspector reached over and took the license from the coroner.

"So this license was cancelled by you, Miss de Peyster?" he asked.

Her startled glance swept her two inquisitors and a bitter smile parted her lips. "To match your melodramatic instinct, Inspector, it would seem the license was cancelled by—the hand that fired the fatal shot."

"The same hand that stamped the license thusly?" And Warfield thrust the paper in front of her. "Look!"

The admonition was needless. In speechless bewilderment she stared at the word "Cancelled," then her glance traveled from the document and her expression of unbelief gave place to one of unutterable horror. Before either man could stop her, she had brushed past them and disappeared.

CHAPTER XI

Under the Eaves

WE three stared at each other in thunderstruck silence. Still without a word, Inspector Warfield folded the marriage license and returned it to Clark.

"A bachelor myself, I've heard the marriage state was more or less a lottery." The coroner chuckled and pocketed the document. "So this was taken out on a wager. Reade staked his happiness on an uncertain quantity—the whim of a woman."

"But not his life," I broke in hastily. "No motive of jealousy now exists for his murder."

"Ah, but Burton, how many knew that this license was only the result of a wager?" Coroner Clark sat down on the couch and spoke low, with frequent glances about the room. "How many knew that Miss de Peyster and Reade were not engaged; that matrimony might not be contemplated seriously?"

"The parties concerned, probably; Miss de Peyster and Reade—"

"And whoever else Reade told," broke in Clark skeptically. "When a man goes so far as to apply for a marriage license, his attentions are serious, whatever the woman's viewpoint." He turned to Warfield with

a touch of impatience as the latter stood silent, pondering deeply. "Am I right, Inspector?"

"Oh, yes, yes," but I could see that Warfield's mind was not on what he was saying. "Listen, Clark," he came closer and lowered his voice, making sure that he was not overheard, "when I broke the news to Miss de Peyster, instead of having hysterics over Reade, her self-possession was remarkable—she stood and gazed at me like a—a—stoic." He hesitated for a sufficiently strong term to express his views. "And now, here with us . . ." the inspector's gesture was indicative of bewilderment as well as indignation. "Had she no love for the man?"

"On the contrary, she must have loved him deeply to have been blind to his real character," retorted Coroner Clark; he looked over his shoulder to make sure he, too, was not overheard. "The District Attorney and I went through Reade's papers, Warfield, after you and Burton left." He smiled significantly. "When you say Reade had money, you've mentioned the only worthwhile thing about him."

I drew in my breath and the scent of spring blossoms in vases dotted about the room came to me—or was it the exquisite perfume which Christine de Peyster used that clung to the pillows against which I rested?

"If ye plaze, sor," Norah spoke from the doorway. "Misther Burton's valise has come, an' I carried it up to his room, which is ready for him."

"Excellent!" Warfield came up. "Do you think

you can make the grade, Mr. Burton; or shall I send a stretcher from Headquarters?"

"Heaven forbid!" I ejaculated fervidly. But once on my feet I stood swaying about like a fool until Warfield's strong hand steadied me, while Dr. Clark offered his aid.

"This way, sor," and piloted by the maid, the three of us went out into the entry and up the narrow, ladder-like stairs. No stretcher could have made the turns, and there was a second or two when I thought the three of us could not navigate them either. The stairs were bricked in and a door at the bottom and top kept their presence hidden from the ordinary visitor.

I was panting from weakness when I reached the second floor, and it was only subconsciously that I noted the long room, similar to the one we had just left, which was obviously Christine's workshop, as I was propelled into a small bedroom across from her studio door, standing wide open.

"Don't wait," I gasped, as Norah turned down the covers of the single bed; "these gentlemen will help me."

Warfield's quiet tones stopped Norah's hasty run toward the door.

"Where is Miss de Peyster?"

"Wid Miss Claire." She cast a defiant look at us. "She's quietin' the poor darlin', and can't be disturbed." And with a flounce of her petticoats, the Irishwoman hurried off.

"I must get along, Warfield," said the coroner, his

eyes happening to light on the clock over the chest of drawers. "Will you go with me to the morgue?"

"If you will wait—"

"Outside in the car," and with a friendly shake of my hand and a word of advice regarding the best care to take of my injured head, he, too, departed.

Warfield proved a deft helper, and soon I was between the cool linen sheets; a sense of rest and peace stole over me and I heaved a long sigh of contentment.

"Here, take this," and the inspector, returning from the door, handed me my automatic pistol. "Not on the bed table," he objected as I laid it down alongside the medicine bottle, water pitcher and glass, the last provided by Norah's thoughtfulness before I reached the bedroom. "And above all," he stooped down until his lips almost touched my ear, "don't let Miss Fechet get her hands on it."

I glared up at him. "Do you insinuate she will shoot—"

"To kill." His tone was dryness itself. "You were too close an actor in the little drama below stairs, Mr. Burton, to realize, as I did, from the stoop of Studio House, that Claire Fechet didn't stumble and fall in front of that fire truck—she threw herself there."

"She what—?" I caught his arm and held him, despite his evident intention of slipping off. "Explain your meaning, Warfield."

"Attempted suicide, I'd call it." He wrenched himself from my grasp. "Don't let her get that gun; she may turn it on herself."

Once, twice, I called Warfield, but the tap, tap of his retreating footsteps alone answered me; the stair door closed softly, then there was silence. I dropped back in bed and pushed my aching forehead deep into the soft and yielding pillow; its fresh linen case felt as grateful as ice against my burning flesh. And so I lay quiet and the clock on the chest of drawers ticked away the half hours and the hours.

And as the shadows lengthened and the objects in my bedroom grew less distinct, the throbbing in my head abated and I stretched out, more at ease. Turning over, I touched my money belt; it lay carefully concealed under my bed covers and close against my side. I had intended asking Warfield to place the money in the safe at Police Headquarters, but his last remarks to me had banished all else from my mind.

Claire Fechet had attempted suicide. Such a thing was monstrous—incredible. But was it impossible? If, as the inspector and the coroner evidently believed, she had shot Reade, an attempt at suicide, fearing arrest, would be a logical outcome. But, admitting her situation was desperate, could she not have found a less horrible mode of suicide than to be ground under the wheels of a racing fire truck, mutilated, maimed for life, if death did not mercifully end her torture.

The picture I conjured up brought cold drops of perspiration out on my forehead and I squirmed about; my bed had suddenly become most uncomfortable. What had the police against Claire? The fact that she was alone in Reade's house, that she had the only key

available to that house, that Reade had been paying her attention, that he planned matrimony with another woman and that woman the person with whom Claire made her home. I caught my breath. What more likely than that she, Claire, was fully aware that the marriage license was the result of a wager—there could be, then, no jealous incentive for her killing the man; she was no woman scorned. What if Reade had been a connoisseur in womanly charms, it did not necessarily follow that Claire was in love with him, nor that from mercenary motives she desired to wed her millionaire employer.

Somewhat satisfied with this last line of reasoning, I reached over to the bed stand and poured out a glass of water. Under the faint glow from the tiny lamp by the thermos pitcher, I saw that the oddly shaped bottle next to it did not hold medicine, my first thought on beholding it, but was a perfume container of colored glass and intricate workmanship.

Steps in the hall outside announced the approach of some one. My gaze rested on my automatic pistol lying prominently in view on the bed stand; there was but time to drop my handkerchief over it when the door of my bedroom opened and Norah came unceremoniously inside.

"Sit ye still," she advised, and placed before me a bed tray laden with numerous dishes.

Unhesitatingly I sampled their contents with an appetite born of long fasting, while Norah, switching on other lights, crossed over to the dormer window and

lowered the shade. She busied herself straightening the furniture and putting away my clothes in bureau and closet; not until that was accomplished did she again approach my bed.

"A delicious supper, Norah; and I've done full justice to it," I remarked, as she rearranged the empty dishes. "I'm greatly obliged to you."

For the first time she smiled; evidently she was proud of her culinary skill. "Be there aught else ye might be wishin', sor?" she asked.

"How is Miss Fechet?"

The dishes rattled as Norah stood one on top of another. "Shlapin', an' I'm not to waken her; thim's the docther's orders." She spoke hurriedly, as if she had learned the words by heart, and stood hesitant, regarding me wrathfully. "An' wud ye believe thim reporters is runnin' the life outa me, wishin' to talk wid the poor dear—as if she knows who kilt Misther Reade!" Indignation made her suddenly garrulous. "An' her so quiet an' hard worrukin', even lavin' so early this mornin' she niver et breakfast at all, at all."

"No breakfast!" I ejaculated feebly, as Norah paused in her rapid speech and looked at me expectantly.

"Nary a mouthful an' me below stairs in plenty o' time to dish an egg an' coffee; but no, she was off an' away by siven." Norah's strong toil-worn hands lifted the tray with ease. "If ye wish annything durin' the night, sor, will ye just touch the bell."

"Yes, yes," I cut in hastily. The bell she alluded to,

attached to an extension cord, was just visible under a corner of my handkerchief. "I see it on the bed table; no, don't trouble to move it nearer"—as the maid balanced the tray in one hand while the other hovered perilously close to my gun beneath the handkerchief. "May I have the evening paper when Miss de Peyster is through with it?"

My request diverted her thoughts. "An' do ye know that bye niver left it, this night av all ithers!" Norah's disgust was plain. "An' me wantin' to read all about Misther Reade. But Misther Charlie's below stairs wid Miss Chris; he'll step over to the corner store whin I ask it. Good night, sor."

My answering good night was spoken mechanically. Norah's chatter had provided food for thought. So Claire had left at seven in the morning to be early at her office in Reade's house. The walk from Studio House there would not consume five minutes. And medical evidence proved Reade died at a quarter of eight. If she had not gone directly to work, where had she spent the intervening time? If she had gone there immediately, then she was in the house at the hour Reade was shot. Could she have been there and not have known of the tragedy taking place within its four walls?

My head started to throb again and, seeking diversion, I looked about the bedroom which Norah had left fully illuminated. Artistic fingers had fashioned the window curtains and the hangings for the maple dresser with its suspended gilt wall mirror. Even to

my masculine eye there was not a jarring note in the dainty arrangement of the early American furniture and the picture frames of a later period which hung upon the sloping walls. The ceiling was unplastered and wide, hand-hewn boards ran between the oak beams. A secretary by the window held a number of books behind its glass panels, and I was about to hop out of bed and get one when a tap sounded on my door; it opened a second later, on my loud, "Come in," and Christine de Peyster crossed the room. In her hand she balanced a cup of after-dinner coffee, while under her arm was tucked a folded newspaper.

"I have been most remiss." My hostess paused as I sat up eagerly. "And I am not sure that you should drink this; Dr. Wyant said nothing stimulating."

"In that case you should stay away—no, don't go, please!" I laid a persuasive hand over hers as I took the cup and saucer. "I'll gladly forego the coffee, but not your presence."

"I'll not force you to do either." Her smile was infectious; it was also brief. "The coffee is diluted with cream and may be safely taken in small doses." Her hand slipped from under mine; I had found it no warmer than the cold china saucer. A rocking-chair was close by and she sank into it. "Norah said that you appeared stronger and that you wished this—"

The newspaper, laid on the foot of my bed, received but a scant glance; my chief concern was the beautiful enigma sitting where the light fell full upon her. What lay behind her calm exterior?

"Has Inspector Warfield returned?" I asked, as she made no effort to address me.

"No." She amplified the monosyllable with some hesitancy, or so it seemed to me. "He called up on the phone to ask about you, as did Dr. Wyant. My only caller in person was Mister Charlie."

"You mean Todd, the postman?"

"Yes; he stopped to inquire for you and Claire." Her soft lips curved into a sympathetic smile. "I imagine they are finding the reporters a disturbing element. It is more peaceful up here." Her glance strayed about. "But is not this glaring light hard on your eyes?" Before I could raise an objection she had extinguished all except the bracket light near the secretary.

"Inspector Warfield told me that you are taking an active part in the hunt for Alfred's—Mr. Reade's, slayer." Christine resumed her old chair, but this time she sat in shadow. "Are there further developments than those mentioned in the evening paper?"

"Not having read the paper, I can't say," I parried swiftly.

"The police admit themselves baffled." She leaned closer. "Columns are devoted to the tragedy, Mr. Burton, but nowhere was any allusion made to—to—the marriage license." For the first time her voice quivered with feeling. "Did you suppress that item of news?"

I shook my head as I placed the empty coffee cup on the bed stand.

"I cannot take credit for that, Miss de Peyster; perhaps the District Attorney—"

"I see." She appeared unconscious that she had interrupted me, and, content to lie back and look at her, I, too, remained quiet. She was worth a thousand glances, even in that half light. Gowned in contrasting colors, which on another, less slender, less perfectly formed, would have been garish, she appeared the embodiment of some artist's dream. Secreted in my money belt was the painted photograph. I had slipped it there when Warfield's attention was taken up with Norah. "Beautiful White Devil," so had Alfred Reade dubbed her, the woman he planned to marry on a wager. Had he done so with cause?

"What has become of Joe Reade?" Her question, abruptly put, startled my thoughts into a fresh channel. "He has not been here, nor even telephoned."

"I have no knowledge of his present whereabouts." I sat up a little straighter and turned inquisitor in my turn. "Are you and Joe on good terms?"

"Why shouldn't we be?" From out the shadows her eyes burned into mine.

"You did not, then, side with Alfred Reade against his nephew?"

"It was a family affair." Her shrug suggested much —or nothing.

"And you, although you contemplated becoming a member of that family circle, took no sides in the quarrel?" Aroused, I put the question with more vehemence than I intended and my voice boomed through

the silent upper ranges of the cottage. Was I mistaken, or did the hall door move just a trifle? Christine sat with her back to it, and I could watch both without changing my position.

Suddenly she stirred and one slippered foot, until then curled under her, came to the floor with almost a stamp.

"The marriage license dulls your understanding, Mr. Burton." The faint mockery in her tones made my ears tingle; it also awoke my combative spirit.

"I'm not so dull, Miss de Peyster, that I don't realize the distinction between two words—a wager and a dare." Eagerly I bent forward, forgetful of my bandaged head, of every ache and pain in my bruised body. "With whom did Reade make you the subject of a wager?"

My question caught her unawares and the color surged into her pale cheeks, even tinting her graceful throat.

"Mr. Burton, please; you grow personal." Her quiet voice conveyed a warning as well as a rebuke and in my turn I reddened. "What you have done for Claire to-day can never be repaid and should not be forgotten, but—but—my nerves are—are—frayed; I have stood so—much—since that dreadful hour when I learned about Alfred."

"And when was that?" Warfield had called her a stoic—but as I glimpsed the smoldering tempest in her fiery glance, I considered his estimate of her worthless. A flash of intuition and I sat upright. "You

did not learn of Reade's murder first from Warfield—ah, I guessed it!"

The hall door was thrown violently open and Doctor Wyant came swiftly to my bedside.

"Tut, tut, Burton, you are making yourself obnoxious! Your illness does not give you the privilege to badger your hostess."

"I'll go now—at once!" I clutched the bedclothes and strove to toss them back as Wyant held them down—something snapped within my head and the one illumination in the room assumed the proportions of a blazing beacon. I was conscious that Wyant transferred his hold from the blankets to my body and then all grew blank.

CHAPTER XII

Blind Trails

SQUEAK, squeak—squeak, squeak! The noise stopped and I turned on my pillow to see what caused it. Seated at arm's length from me was Norah. With eyes tight closed, she once more commenced the noisy rocking back and forth which had, by its persistence, aroused me from the apathy which had held me quiet ever since Doctor Wyant had brought me back to consciousness with the aid of powerful restoratives. When he had left, when Christine de Peyster had departed, were events which had failed to register in my exhausted condition.

"Sit still!" The peremptory order scared Norah into wakefulness. Her terrified expression caused me momentary regret that my irritation at the continuous squeak had gotten the better of my intention to remain silent. "Go to bed, Norah."

She blinked at me. "An' which iver am I to do?" she demanded. Her usually loud voice was lowered to suit a sick room and the hour. "First ye tell me to stay, an' thin in the same breath ye till me to get up; faith, an' how kin a body plaze ye, Misther Burton?"

I did not feel strong enough to argue. "Stay," I murmured, "but don't rock." And for a time there was silence.

"Misther Burton, dear." Norah's low, wheedling tones disarmed anger. "I kin see yer eyes are open an' shlape's nowheres near ye; would ye mind thin if I lift to change me shoes; me feet's in tormint?"

"Don't stay at all, Norah," I exclaimed quickly. "There is no need; in fact, I'm well enough to leave," struggling to an elbow. Norah promptly dropped back in the rocker.

"Faith, an' if ye take that tone, sor, I'll sit here. Why," sensing further objection on my part, "didn't Miss Chris take the place whin Dr. Wyant wished me to call an ambulance! Ye're to stay right here under her eye; thim's me ordhers, given not an hour agone."

Puzzled I lay back. Why did Christine de Peyster wish me to remain under her roof and why was Dr. Wyant equally insistent that I should not? My inclinations were for instant departure.

"What's the time?"

"Midnight." Norah's tones were ominously quiet; her quick, Irish wit sensed the purport of the question. "Rist as aisy as ye kin, sor; the morn'll soon be here."

The truth of her statement was indisputable. I had caused Christine's household sufficient annoyance without arousing its inmates at such an hour. But I had, as Dr. Wyant tersely put it, made myself obnoxious to the woman whose hospitality I was accepting, no matter how unwillingly. The thought stung and I moved restlessly.

"Run along and make yourself comfortable, Norah." A lack of movement on her part brought my head up

from the pillows, to find the servant still occupying the rocking-chair. "I'll not leave without seeing Miss de Peyster," I promised. "And I'll not disturb her to-night."

"Praise be!" Norah rose and stretched her cramped muscles; the rocker was both small and low. "Miss Chris is a bundle o' nerves, an' what wid her grief over Misther Reade's takin' off an' the p'lice worryin' all of us an' that Andy Grymes a-runnin' after me—" she paused for breath. "It's been a turrible day, Misther Burton."

"I can believe it," I responded grimly. "But why was Andy worrying you?"

Norah came closer to the bed. "He knows Miss Chris don't like him wid me," she admitted confidentially. "An' the divil's not above askin' me favors."

"Such as what, Norah?"

"Gettin' Misther Charlie to lave his letters here so that persnickity wife of his don't lay her fingers on 'em." Norah bent closer impulsively. "Ye can't tell me, Misther Burton, that Mrs. Andy didn't have some holt on Misther Reade, else why did he keep that triflin' Andy about his home?" And with a sage shake of her head, the Irishwoman left me alone.

But she had given me a new viewpoint. In the few times that I had seen Mrs. Andy Grymes, I had been impressed by two things: first, that her station in life was above that of her husband, and, second, that she could be a good hater. She had been none too careful in exposing her dislike to Claire Fechet. And that the

dislike was returned in full measure, I had also gathered. What then, was the cause of the animus between Reade's young secretary and his housekeeper? Jealousy, reason answered. I groaned aloud.

"Are you in great pain?" The softly put question came from over my shoulder and I twisted about. There by my bed stood Claire Fechet. When she had made her silent entry and how long she had been there, I did not know. For a second I lay silent, looking up at her.

"My suffering is mainly mental," I stammered, reading the concern in her expressive eyes.

"And therefore the more acute!" A deep sigh accompanied her words. "I could not rest, Mr. Burton, without coming to you—oh, I have been here before," she interrupted hastily. "I did not wait until now, but always some one was with you."

"Yes?" I prompted, conscious of my quickening pulse. "What can I do?"

"It's what you have done that has brought me here." Her nervousness was apparent even in the dimly lit room. "Your quickness and courage saved me from a horrible death!" A shudder shook her and she buried her face in her hands, but for only an instant; then her eyes, bright with tears, gleamed down at me. "You have placed me under a debt I can never repay."

"Hush!" I took her hot, feverish hand in both of mine. "Let's talk of something else. Won't you sit down?"

With her free hand she reached across and switched

on the bed lamp, then regarded me critically under its direct rays.

"You are not just in shape for a visitation," she remarked gravely. "Dr. Wyant would not approve—"

"Who cares?" My fingers tightened over hers as she drew back. "Oh, your father's ring is gone!" Her glance followed mine to the finger where I had last seen the massive gold seal, bearing her family crest.

"The ring's too big, too loose for everyday wear." Her halting speech betrayed confusion. "I—might drop it—again." Swiftly she changed the subject. "Can I do anything for you, Mr. Burton?"

"Sit awhile," and I released her hand, the better to indicate the rocking-chair. She compromised by slipping over to the foot of my bed and remaining there, ready for instant flight. At that distance there was little distinction between her white gown and the paleness of her cheeks; her eyes, overly bright for a well person, shone with unnatural brilliance. Alarmed, I sat up.

"Have you had medical care?" I demanded. "Were you not more hurt than you realize by your—fall—in front of the truck?" It was my turn to stammer; for the life of me I could not check the hesitation, and inwardly I anathematized Inspector Warfield for his suggestion of suicide. All unwarily, it had tripped my tongue.

"A fatal stumble but for you, Mr. Burton." Claire's tone grew lifeless, dead. "Don't worry about my state of health." She looked wraithlike in her tall young

beauty. "A night's rest will quiet my nerves." Suddenly her false calm gave way. "But, oh, never, never can I close my eyes to that dreadful figure in the chair—though dead, Alfred Reade is a living curse." Her raised hands dropped to her sides and with no backward glance, Claire Fechet turned and left the bedroom.

For what seemed a long time I stared ahead and it seemed to my overexcited brain that I still looked into her eyes—eyes ablaze with unveiled fury.

"I'm back agin, sor." Norah's lowered tones were startling in their nearness and I turned on my side to find the Irishwoman standing, glass in hand, at the head of my bed. "Take a sip o' this, sor," she coaxed. "'Tis nothin' betther for ye thin ice-cold eggnog, an' I made it wid me own hands just now."

Whether her advice was sound or not worried me not a whit. With emphatic thanks I swallowed the stimulating drink and gave her back the empty glass.

"Go to bed, Norah," I directed. "I'll need nothing more, and, sitting here, you only keep me awake."

She paused undecidedly. "If ye feel that way—" Her glance strayed about the room. "Iverythin's fixed for the night an' I kin rist on the sofy in Miss Chris' studio across the way."

"If you are within sound of my voice, I'll talk to you all night, Norah," I threatened, and, smiling, she turned off the lights, including the bed lamp, before I could stop her. Her heavy tread was distinguishable in the hall and then died away.

The darkness was a relief and to be alone also had its quieting effect; the eggnog made me drowsy and I closed my eyes. I must have slept for over an hour, the sleep of utter exhaustion. It was something jamming into my left side which first rendered me uncomfortable; then, as the sensation became more painful, I roused to drowsy consciousness. It was some seconds before I realized that my leather money pouch was boring into me, numbing the flesh.

My attempt to push it away awakened me more fully and I sat up. Surely I had buckled the flap! Leaning over, I switched on the bed lamp and examined the pouch. Not until I found its contents intact did I draw a satisfactory breath. I would have given much to have placed the ten thousand dollars in some bank that afternoon. But why worry over the possession of money in a household composed only of women!

I turned out the bed lamp and settled down, but instead of dropping off to sleep, I grew more wakeful and threshed about in the bed. In sheer disgust, I got up and walked over to the window. My progress there and back to the bed was both slow and shaky, and I stood clinging to the footboard, thankful for its support. The dormer window looked out upon the front street—that I had seen by the aid of the gas lamps below; the door opposite the bed led to the private bathroom, the closet was on the opposite side and the door I faced must lead into the hall.

So reasoning, I released my grip on the bed and, advancing, turned the door knob softly. My surmise

was correct; the narrow hall and a wide doorway confronted me. Through the latter came a refreshing breeze and I propped open my own door, thinking thus to air the stuffy bedroom. Through the wide doorway ahead, I caught sight of statuary gleaming white in the faint light that filtered through the north windows and, curious, I crossed the hall and poked my head inside the studio. A prolonged snore cut the stillness, startlingly loud; then I smiled as I recalled Norah's promise to occupy the "sofy" in Christine de Peyster's studio. My respect for the Irishwoman increased as I looked at the dim, ghost-like figures—to sleep among the marble busts and clay figures required steady nerves and a clear conscience!

There was a cleared space from the doorway to the windows and I hesitated. Never had I felt more wakeful. To lie longer in bed and twist and turn went against the grain. My indecision was brief. Stepping gingerly, I made the distance without awakening the slumbering Irishwoman. The studio was long and wide, with many objects in it, and, judging from the snores, the sofa and Norah were tucked away in the farthest corner, out of sight but not out of sound. Because of her I refrained from turning on the electric lights.

The view from the studio windows confirmed my impression that the cottage had been the low, stone building seen that morning from the housekeeper's study in the Reade mansion. Now, with every window dark, the Reade house appeared bleak and somber

against the sky line and totally deserted. Evidently the policeman on guard preferred to watch the house from the outside rather than occupy space within the mansion where reposed the body of the murdered man.

Directly beneath where I stood I made out the brick wall which separated Christine de Peyster's yard from Reade's garden, and on my right towered the Alamo Apartment. Lights still burned in some parts of the building. One apartment toward the back and on the first floor had the shades up and it was possible to see the lighted interior of the room nearest the garden. My casual glance grew prolonged as a woman stepped in front of a lighted lamp and her profile was silhouetted on the windowpane. I leaned out as far as I could. What was Mrs. Andy Grymes doing up and fully dressed at such an hour? That she was talking—and talking vehemently—to some one, was obvious from her gestures and the opening and shutting of her mouth. Suddenly her companion moved into view and, before he yanked down the window shade, I had recognized Dr. Thomas Wyant.

I paused where I was in deep thought. Mrs. Andy had spoken of securing living accommodations in the Alamo. Was she then in her own newly acquired quarters or had she gone to Dr. Wyant's office for medical advice? For an ill person she seemed remarkably healthy, if I could judge her condition from such a distance. I, too, had been classed as an invalid, but I was able to be up and about.

And that I was just able to be up and about, I real-

ized as I turned to go back to my bedroom. My gait had become a shuffling walk by the time I reached my door and it was a relief to finally perch on the edge of my bed. Loosening the buckle of the money pouch, which I had strapped around my waist before leaving the bedroom, I was about to draw up the sheets when I remembered the thermos pitcher. My exertions had proven not only exhausting but heating, and the mere thought of cold water sent my hand hastily to the bed lamp. Switching it on, I quenched my thirst and, putting down the glass, took up my handkerchief—my automatic pistol was gone from beneath it!

Feverishly I felt under the pillows, thinking I might have thrust it there, then tossed back the bed linen—no results; from the bed I hurried to the dresser and the chest of drawers. My belongings were there—all except my pistol.

I broke out into a cold perspiration as Warfield's warning came to me. Had Claire Fechet carried off the pistol with suicidal intent? I started up, then hesitated—to go through the house at that hour searching for a gun would place me in the ranks of the insane. There was a reasonable explanation for its disappearance, there *must* be.

Dropping weakly down on the bench in front of the dresser, I scanned half-heartedly the dainty toilet articles—a pin tray holding a half-burnt cigarette was nearest to me and I moved it aside. Had the smoker been considerate enough to leave a package behind? The stub rolled out of the unevenly balanced pin tray

and lay with its tiny lettering uppermost: "Dimitrino & Co., Cairo, Egypt."

Slowly, carefully I picked up the cigarette—even to the words, "Large Size," it was a duplicate of the Dimitrino I had found in the window of the study occupied by Reade's housekeeper, Mrs. Andy Grymes.

CHAPTER XIII

The Coroner's Inquest

NORAH heard the closing of the stair door and came hastily into the small entry.

"Misther Burton!" Her scandalized tones caused me to drop my hat and overcoat on the nearest chair. "An' didn't I lave ye upstairs restin' easy, promisin', as soon as me worruk was done, to come up wid the mornin' papers?"

"Yes, Norah," I broke in, "but I can't linger here indefinitely. Where is your mistress?"

"Miss Chris, is it? She's out for a spell." The Irishwoman pulled back the portières. "An' Miss Claire's wid her. Step inside, sor; they'll be back before noon."

Reluctantly I went into the living room. My plans to curtail my stay at Studio House were not working out as I had hoped. On awaking, after fitful slumber through the early hours of the morning, I had eaten breakfast, brought to me by Norah—an attentive Norah, but a very glum one. Whether it was the result of sleeping on a sofa from midnight until she went downstairs at seven in the morning, or whether her silence came from instructions, I had no means of knowing. Neither my hostess nor Claire Fechet had

mounted to the second floor, and my only visitor was Dr. Wyant's assistant. The latter had removed the bandages, dressed my cuts and gone his way as uncommunicative as the lowly clam.

The living room, flooded with sunlight, was even more attractive than I had judged it to be from my first glimpse of it, less than twenty-four hours before. Instead of sitting down, I paced back and forth, looking at the furniture, the rugs and pictures, and chiefly at the ornaments on tables and smoking stand. The handsome bronze cigarette box was devoid of contents.

Turning on my heel I crossed to one of the closed doors and pulled it open; before me was a small hallway from which three doors led to a bedroom, bath, and another bedroom. Evidently, in my search for Norah, I had almost walked into the suite of rooms occupied by Christine and Claire.

"An' where be ye goin' to?" demanded an irate voice over my shoulder, and Norah bustled forward. "Didn't I tell ye the loidies were out?"

"I was looking for you." Put on the defensive by her aggressive attitude, I backed into the living room. "You went through some door—"

"Sure, an' 'twas the opposite wan—to me own quarthers." She eyed me keenly. "An' what will ye be wishin', sor?"

"Cigarettes—"

"Oh, to be sure!" Norah crossed over to an old highboy and opened one of the lower drawers. "An' would ye rather have a seegar?"

"No, thanks." At her elbow, I looked carefully over the boxes in the drawer; either Christine de Peyster knew tobacco or her masculine advisor liked only the best brands of cigars. I would have enjoyed any from the three boxes Norah exposed, but I was in search of cigarettes. Those reposing in the drawer were domestic products only. Concealing my disappointment, I selected a package and opened it.

"By the way, Norah, who smoked in my room last night?" I inquired, lighting a match.

"I dunno, sor; either one of the young loidies, mebbe —or both," was her noncommittal reply. " 'Tis a habit I can niver abide."

I laughed as I tossed the burnt match into the fireplace. "Perhaps Dr. Wyant brought his cigarettes along when you admitted him?"

Was I mistaken, or did her expression change ever so slightly?

"Mebbe so, but I didn't let the doctor in. 'Twas Miss Claire beat me to the front door." Norah's grumpy tones grew more pronounced. "She was that anxious to know about ye."

My color heightened until even my ears burned. If the servant took note of my embarrassment, she was too tactful to show it.

"Is Dr. Wyant Miss de Peyster's family physician?" I asked hastily.

"Aye, that he be, an' the finest wan in this or anny counthry." Norah's attitude challenged denial. "Good an' gintle an' kind. Bad cess to the day Miss Chris

turned a deaf ear to his pleadin'—" She stopped abruptly and cast a frightened look at me. "The papers be yonder, Misther Burton."

"All right." I drew close to Norah. "Did Miss de Peyster breakfast at her usual hour yesterday?"

"I set her tray in her room at sivin-fifteen—"

"So early?" Surprised, I stared at the servant. "She does not keep fashionable hours."

"Indade, yes, as a rule; but 'twas to let me off early yisterday—"

"Ah, then you don't know who called to see Miss de Peyster during the morning?"

"How could I, whin I wasn't back till ye come?" Norah had grown restive under my rapid-fire questioning. "Listen to me runnin' on an' me worruk to be done."

"But, Norah, haven't you finished your housework by now?"

"Ivery room but yours an' me kitchen"—the last was an afterthought. "Why, sor?"

"Have you seen a pistol around?" I jingled some coins suggestively. "A gun?"

"A gun, is it?" She gazed at me in round-eyed wonder. "Sure, an' ye're jokin'? What would a passel o' wimmin be doin' wid a gun, now?" Relishing her own question, she burst into explosive laughter, and disappeared kitchenward.

More and more puzzled I stood still and surveyed the room. My gun could not have walked away. And if carried off, it had not been done accidentally. Why

hadn't Christine and Claire left a note, or seen me before going out? To steal a gun from a guest was unusual enough to demand an explanation.

With a futile sigh I went over to the French doors, with their leaded glass, and looked out on the stone terrace. Short graveled walks radiated from the bird's bath in the center of the bit of a yard. Grasping the knob I pushed against the door. It was locked. A more careful look at the hardware showed me that no key was in the lock. Swiftly I tried the second door, to find it similarly fastened, with no means of opening it.

Turning away in disgust, I noticed the morning paper spread open on the big divan, and the scare headlines fascinated me:

MILLIONAIRE READE SHOT TO DEATH

PAJAMA-CLAD FIGURE DISCOVERED
IN LIVING ROOM

Dropping down on the divan, I took up the paper and read eagerly the three columns or more of text devoted to the murder of one of Washington's picturesque characters. Much space was given to Reade as a patron of the arts and to his social activities; then the article skipped to his career as a turfman and a rancher and his spectacular rise to wealth when oil was located on his ranch in Beaumont, Texas. That part was familiar to me, and I switched to another, and leading

column. There the death scene was accurately described and I found my name featured prominently with that of Claire Fechet as the finders of the dead millionaire. Space was devoted to Inspector Warfield's testimony, which was concise, and Mrs. Andy Grymes and her husband received much notice and their absence from the city was stressed. But nowhere, as I feverishly turned the pages in my search, was Christine de Peyster brought into the investigation; that, to me, was as great a mystery as the murder itself. What motive prompted the District Attorney, Inspector Warfield and Coroner Clark to continue to withhold all mention of the cancelled marriage certificate?

The last paragraph caught and held my attention as I was about to cast the paper aside:

"The preliminary hearing at the morgue late yesterday afternoon was adjourned by Coroner Clark until this morning, when the inquest will be resumed at ten o'clock. It is understood that one of the first witnesses to take the stand will be Miss Claire Fechet, secretary—"

I bounded to my feet. Why had not Warfield sent for me? I, too, was a material witness, but here I was, kicking my heels in an empty house! Crossing to a wall mirror, I carefully inspected my injured head, or as much of the injury as came within my vision. Wyant's assistant had removed the enveloping outer bandages and the present dressing was not conspicuous.

Norah came in a hurry in response to my lusty hail.

"Call a taxi," I directed, as my search for the tele-

phone directory proved a waste of time and temper. "I'm off to the morgue." The servant's stare grew intensified. "Why didn't you tell me that Miss de Peyster and Miss Fechet were there?"

Instead of replying, Norah stood stolidly in the center of the room and, losing all patience, I picked up the telephone, intending to ask for Information.

"Wait, sor," she interposed hastily. "There's a taxi stand at the corner; I'll call wan." And she was out of the house and down the street before I, slower moving, had gathered up my hat and overcoat and descended the short flight of steps.

Norah and the taxi met me at the curb. "A moment, Misther Burton." She accepted readily the treasury bill I thrust in her hand. "Ye'll be comin' back?"

"Oh, surely, to get my things." I sprang inside the cab, but still the Irishwoman detained me, thrusting her head and shoulders through the open window. "I'll see Miss de Peyster and explain—"

"Will ye, now?" Her expression brightened. "Then plaze tell Miss Chris there was no answer to her note." She raised her voice, determined to be heard as a furniture van rattled by. "Jes' say that, an' Miss Chris'll know Misther Joe sint none."

"All right, Norah. The morgue." My promise to her and my direction to the driver were given in the same breath. He released the clutch and only Norah's hasty scramble off the running board saved her from a fall. She was standing in front of Studio House watching the taxi when we turned the corner.

I sat back. Norah might remain behind, but her words lingered. The Irishwoman's slip of the tongue implied that Joe Reade had not responded to a note from Christine de Peyster, although the latter had expected an answer. Was there, after all, friction between the woman Alfred Reade planned to marry and his nephew?

I had, on previous visits to the national capital, gained a tourist's knowledge of Pennsylvania Avenue and other famous thoroughfares, but my taxi carried me through unfrequented streets and along unknown sections of the city. Many cars were parked close to the insignificant building, which bore the legend: "District of Columbia Morgue" on its façade, and a group of both men and women, idling about, watched me pay my driver and enter the morgue.

The crowd outside was surpassed by the people jammed into the big square room where inquests were conducted. Seeing no one in authority, I wedged myself through the first door that I spotted and found no space available save that of standing room. Evidently the murder of Alfred Reade had created a sensation, for men and women in every walk of life were present. On a raised platform were the coroner's jury, the coroner and his assistant, and the chair for the witness. The person seated in it, at the moment of my entrance, was Charlie Todd, the postman.

"Then you swear that these are the identical letters that you gave to Alfred Reade?" demanded Coroner

Clark, and in his upraised hand I recognized the envelopes we had found in the death chamber.

"I do, sir." Todd's calm voice easily carried through the stuffy, overcrowded room to where I stood with my back against the wall.

"You left these letters in Reade's possession at seven-thirty, yesterday morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"And Reade was killed fifteen minutes later." Coroner Clark tossed the envelopes onto the table by which he stood. "You, Todd, were the last person to see him alive—"

"Except the murderer," corrected Todd respectfully, and a juror, following the examination with eyes, ears and head as he moved with each question asked, indulged in a guffaw. The instant attention it brought to him reddened his cheeks and he shrank into the background.

"And you heard no sound, saw no one back of Reade while he was signing the receipt?" questioned Clark eagerly.

"No, sir." Todd spoke with convincing force. "Absolutely no one, and the house was as quiet as the dead."

"Was there anything unusual in Reade's bearing?" persisted the coroner. "Anything like agitation, anger —think well before you answer."

Todd screwed up his eyes as he rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"He was his usual self, save for his pajamas," he

declared. "I'd never seen him dressed that way before."

The coroner turned away. "That's all, Todd." And, leaving the platform, the postman brushed shoulders with the next witness brought forward by the morgue master, from a room to the right of the platform. I craned forward, endeavoring to catch sight of those inside before the door closed, but my effort was unrewarded. If Claire and Christine were waiting in the room reserved for witnesses, they were not near the entrance. The inquest had been going on for nearly two hours; had they testified before my arrival?

The singsong voice of the morgue master administering the oath came to me above a low murmur which grew louder as more spectators chatted among themselves and I missed the first two or three questions put to the witness, but when Coroner Clark raised his voice, instant silence followed.

"Gentlemen," he began, addressing the jury; "you have been told the results of the autopsy—how Alfred Reade came to his death yesterday morning at seven forty-five o'clock from a pistol shot at close range. This bullet"—he held it out on the palm of his hand—"was pried out of the wall just back of Reade, and this"—he displayed the cartridge—"was lying on the floor at Reade's feet." Turning back, he looked at the witness.

"Mr. Willis, you have just stated that you are an expert in firearms and employed by the United States

Cartridge Company. Have you examined this cartridge?"

"Yes, Mr. Coroner." The witness, a small man nervously inclined, hitched forward in his chair. "It is one made by my company for the United States Army, and is for use in a .45 caliber automatic pistol—the pistol carried by the Army."

"That's all; thanks." And Willis retired, relief written on his countenance.

What the coroner said next I did not catch, for Inspector Warfield, entering at that moment, elbowed his way to where I stood.

"I was on my way to get you," he explained, in an undertone. "But Miss de Peyster said the doctor had advised complete rest for another day."

"Ah, then she is here?"

"Yes, in the private room yonder." Warfield pointed to the closed door. "We saw you come in"—he turned a quizzical eye on me. "It's hard to say which was the more upset by your appearance, Miss de Peyster or Miss Fechet."

"I see no reason why either should be agitated," I retorted heatedly, and shifted my weight from one foot to the other; standing was fatiguing business. My heavy breathing did not escape Warfield's notice.

"Come forward," he whispered in my ear. "The coroner wishes you—" The rest was lost as we maneuvered our way up the aisle, but instead of occupying the two folding chairs provided by a morgue attendant at our approach, Warfield piloted me to the platform.

I had attended too many inquests and court sessions not to be entirely familiar with the procedure; therefore, I was in the witness chair in record time; once there, however, I found Coroner Clark desired a detailed description of the discovery of Reade's body, so that it was fully a half hour before my examination was completed. Warfield was waiting for me at the foot of the platform steps and I found he had kept the folding chairs for our use. Seated at last in comparative comfort, I glanced up at the witness chair a few feet away and saw that it was occupied by Mrs. Andy Grymes.

I stared at the housekeeper in surprise. The morning newspaper had carried a full account of her testimony at the inquest late yesterday afternoon. Had some new development necessitated her recall? Mrs. Andy had evidently been sworn in during our progress up the aisle, for she now sat back quietly, with hands folded in her lap. Rouge, carefully applied, covered the whiteness of her cheeks, but did not disguise the dark circles under her eyes; the latter gave clear evidence of a sleepless night, and nothing more serious. My wonderment grew; illness could not have occasioned her nocturnal visit to Dr. Wyant, or caused her to summon him to her apartment.

"Mrs. Grymes"—the coroner's raised voice broke the stillness so close to me that I actually started. Collecting a few papers, he stepped around the table and confronted the witness. "Did your late employer, Mr. Reade, keep an automatic pistol in his house?"

"I never saw it, Doctor, if he did."

"And your husband, Andy," persisted Clark, giving her scarcely time to complete her sentence. "Did he have a gun?"

"Not here, sir; *never!*" her speech quickened and the last word was heavily accentuated.

"But you have known him to have a gun?" The housekeeper regarded the coroner through narrowed lids.

"Certainly, sir; Andrew served in the Army during the War," she said, and pride was discernible in her simple statement. "He brought back a citation for bravery."

"And no side arms?"

"None, sir." Mrs. Andy's lips compressed themselves into a thin line. "He couldn't have brought a gun into the house and kept it there without my knowing."

Clark stroked his chin while he stared hard at the housekeeper.

"Where did Mr. Reade spend Sunday?" he demanded.

"He went to church in the morning." Slightly disconcerted by his abrupt switch, Mrs. Andy spoke more rapidly. "When he came back, he refused luncheon and later on went into his garden."

"How long did Mr. Reade stay there?"

"I don't know, sir; I didn't see him again until just as we left for Rosewood." The housekeeper touched her lips with her handkerchief.

"Was any one with him in the garden?"

"I can't say, sir." Her eyes dropped, then she raised her head and gazed full at Clark. "Sometimes Miss de Peyster and he had tea under the magnolias."

My glance shot from the housekeeper to the press table; the expected had happened—Christine de Peyster's name had at last been brought openly into the case.

CHAPTER XIV

Entangling Evidence

AND that her name was one to conjure with, I judged from the electrifying effect it had upon the reporters. With pencils poised over copy sheets they one and all regarded the housekeeper with lively interest.

"Do you know positively that Miss de Peyster and Reade were together under the magnolias Sunday afternoon?" asked Coroner Clark swiftly.

"No, sir."

"Then what do you mean by supposing they were?" That the coroner was provoked was plain, and Mrs. Andy changed color under her rouge. "I wish direct testimony, not hearsay evidence."

"But, sir," there was an obstinate curve to Mrs. Andy's thin lips, "you asked me if any one was with Mr. Reade, and there's a gate opening from his garden into hers, and Miss de Peyster is the only one having a key to it." The housekeeper's hurried breathing was audible. "If any one but Miss de Peyster joined him in the garden, that person would have to ring our front-door bell."

"Let me get this straight"—Clark came closer to her chair. "No one can enter Reade's garden save through

his living room door or through Miss de Peyster's gate, to which she, alone, has a key?"

"No one, sir, unless they jump the wall." The housekeeper's emphatic answer rang through the room. "My husband does the gardening and he had to go through Mr. Reade's living room to get there—there's a shed in the garden for the lawn mower and hose."

"I see." Again the coroner stroked his chin. "And how about the living room door—can it be opened from the garden side?"

"It cannot," declared Mrs. Andy with conviction. "Mr. Reade never let *that* key out of his possession, and the door was double guarded by the drop latch on the inside."

"Why did Mr. Reade take such precautions to guard this garden door?" demanded Clark. "Was his life threatened?"

"He never told me."

"Was he afraid of housebreakers?"

"It might be." Mrs. Andy moved her cramped muscles; sitting in one position was tiring. "Mr. Reade always paid bills in cash, and generally kept large sums of money on hand."

"Was this known publicly?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I can't say, sir; Andy and I never talked outside about Mr. Reade and his affairs."

"Very discreet," commented Clark with dry em-

phasis. "When was Mr. Reade's living room and secretary's office last cleaned?"

Mrs. Andy straightened up; the question had surprised her.

"Wah Ling takes care of the lower floors," she stated. "In his absence, I dusted and swept those rooms early Sunday morning."

"After that did you rearrange any furniture in the living room?"

"I didn't, sir." Mrs. Andy flashed a sharp, inquiring look at Clark. "But Mr. Reade came in just as I was finishing sweeping and pushed his desk farther down the room. I offered to help, but he said 'twas too heavy work for a woman."

"And why did he change the position of his desk?"

"He didn't say, sir."

Coroner Clark wrote hastily on his scratch pad, at the moment Warfield nudged me. "That disposes of your theory, Mr. Burton." The inspector paused as Clark asked:

"Did any one call on Sunday, Mrs. Grymes?"

"Not a soul."

"And when did you last see Miss Claire Fechet at her desk in the secretary's office?" asked Clark, never removing his gaze from Mrs. Andy. The latter's answer was prompt and to the point.

"At noon on Saturday; she left a few minutes later and I let her out the front door." Mrs. Andy paused and glanced sideways at the coroner. "Sometimes Miss

Fechet went to Studio House by way of Mr. Reade's garden."

"Did she sometimes come to work through the garden?"

"No one came in that way." Mrs. Andy spoke in haste. "Not unless Mr. Reade was with them; he never let any one use that door as a passageway."

"Oh!" The coroner's ejaculation was tinged with unbelief as well as surprise, and again Mrs. Andy colored. "You are excused, madam."

The housekeeper needed no second invitation to vacate the witness chair. She was off the platform and out of the room before a small negro, piloted by the morgue master, took her place in the witness chair. Looking up into his grinning face as he stood while the oath was being administered, I recognized the boy I had seen in Dr. Wyant's office.

"Sit down, Sylvester," directed Coroner Clark. "Now, tell us when you last saw Mr. Alfred Reade."

"Yassuh." Sylvester perched himself on the edge of the chair, ready to retreat at the slightest word; his prominence pleased him, but a deep-seated fear of all courts tempered his satisfaction. "I done seen Mistuh Reade in his garden on Sunday afternoon, suh. An' he seen me, too." The darky's eyes rolled, showing their whites to an alarming extent.

"Where?" prompted Clark.

"A-leanin' out ob Doctuh Wyant's window." Sylvester's shrill tones were lowered. "It wuz mah Sunday off an' while I wuz waitin' fo' de doctuh, I wuz

jes' settin' in de sunshine. Mistuh Reade, he cum up de path an' ask fo' "—an unexpected sneeze interrupted Sylvester's testimony—"fo' Mistuh Joe Reade."

"What then?" Annoyed by the darky's frequent pauses, Coroner Clark spoke with sharp authority.

"Ah says dey warn't no one dere but me." Abashed by the coroner's interruption, Sylvester hurried his reply. "An' Mistuh Reade takes a papuh out an' holds it up—"

"Was this the paper?" Clark extended the marriage license, blank side up.

"Dat's de size," admitted Sylvester, and, as Clark reversed the paper, "yassuh; it done hab writin' on it jes' like dat—funny lookin' fo' a lettuh."

"Were you too far away to read the printing?" asked Clark quickly.

"No, suh; but jes' as Mistuh Reade says 'Tell 'em I'se gwine to be married,' Mistuh Joe lift me off my perch an' drap me on de flo'."

"Go on!" ordered the coroner; he, like others in the room, was hanging on the darky's words.

"Mistuh Joe an' his uncle wuz still talkin'." Sylvester scratched a woolly pate. "But I can't jes' say what 'twas all about, fo' I seen Doctuh Wyant standin' by his desk an' his look tole me I'd bettuh beat it."

"And what time did all this take place?" asked Clark, drawing paper and pencil toward him.

"Three o'clock." Sylvester wriggled back in his chair and assumed a more comfortable pose; he had said his say and satisfaction exuded from him.

"Sylvester." Clark looked across at the witness. "How long have you been in Dr. Wyant's employ?"

"A yeah, suh."

"Was Mr. Reade a frequent visitor there?"

"Not lately, he wuzn't," admitted the darky; "not since Mistuh Joe libed wif de doctuh; dey ain't been frien's since."

"Ah!" Clark's exclamation was his only comment. "Run along, Sylvester."

The abrupt dismissal took the office boy by surprise; however, once on his feet, he skipped down the platform steps. But in the aisle his rapid gait faltered; coming toward him was Joe Reade. With remarkable agility, Sylvester wedged his small person behind Charlie Todd as the postman, an interested spectator since leaving the witness chair, drew his long legs out of Joe's path.

"This way, Mr. Reade." At the coroner's hail Joe, about to continue his search for a chair, came forward. "You were not here when your name was called this morning."

"Sorry to be late; I could only just make it." In nowise discomposed, Joe turned and surveyed the spectators. "Where are the other witnesses?"

"You came in the wrong door." Clark motioned to the morgue master. "Don't keep us waiting any longer, Mr. Reade; come to the platform, sir."

The peremptory order dyed Joe's cheeks a deeper color; it had not subsided when he finally dropped down into the witness chair. With an air of imper-

sonal interest which jarred rather than pleased Coroner Clark, judging from the latter's frequent frowns, Joe stated his age, his name, occupation, and relationship to the dead man, and then told of his quarrel with Alfred Reade, which ended in his departure from his uncle's home.

Clark paused, glanced about at the jurors and then back at Joe.

"Mr. Reade," he began, and his manner had grown even more serious, "did your uncle's matrimonial plans ever enter into your disputes?"

Joe's air of detachment left him. "Uncle Alfred was a free agent; whether he wished to marry or remain single was no concern of mine."

"Although you might have become, logically, heir to his millions if your uncle remained unmarried?"

The young man stirred uneasily. "Hardly his heir, after our quarrel," he pointed out.

"And you wish us to believe that you forfeited his favor over a door key and not a woman?" The coroner's skepticism was plain to all.

"Believe it or not," retorted Joe hotly. "I've told the truth."

"But not the whole truth." Clark circled the table and approached the witness chair. "You have not told us that you knew on Sunday afternoon that your uncle planned to marry and"—Clark's finger emphasized his meaning—"you even saw the marriage license."

"What of it?" Joe's attempt at a laugh was a

miserable failure. "Uncle Alfred was always threatening to marry—"

"Ah, threatening—we have the truth at last." Clark's smile was meant to aggravate. "And on Sunday, whom did your uncle threaten to marry?"

"I don't know." The admission slipped out unawares and Joe's face turned a motley color. "Uncle Alfred didn't say—"

"But he held up the marriage license—"

"With his thumb over the woman's name," responded Joe, and his vehement answer bore the stamp of truth. "Ask Dr. Wyant; he was peering over my shoulder when Uncle Alfred folded the paper and walked off."

"Where to?"

"Under the magnolias."

"Was he there—alone?"

Joe hesitated. "I thought I heard voices, but I can't swear to it," he explained. "The magnolias are out in full bloom and looking down from our distant window we couldn't see who stood or sat under the trees."

Clark took off his eyeglasses and polished them. It was not until they were adjusted on his nose again that he addressed Joe.

"Did you question your uncle further on the subject?"

"I never spoke to him again." Joe's hushed tones quieted a whispered word between the morgue master and Inspector Warfield and they both turned and looked at him long and steadfastly.

"Then we are to understand that you do not know at this instant the woman's name given in the marriage license?" asked Clark incredulously.

"I do not."

Clark wavered, one eye on the table where lay the marriage license, face down, and one on the young man.

"Can't you hazard a guess whose name would be there, Mr. Reade?" he asked.

"I might, but I don't intend to!" And Joe, folding his arms, sat back. "To drag any woman into this investigation would smirch her reputation by sheer innuendo."

"Indeed!" Clark forced a smile. "You are considerate of the other sex, Mr. Reade; very commendable, but foolish. The marriage license is here—"

"Then why not read it aloud?" challenged Joe, but I noticed the nervous twitching of his lips and that his fingers were clenched about the chair arms. The reporters were also bending forward, sharing his tension in some degree.

"Presently, Mr. Reade, presently," retorted the coroner, keeping his temper. "There is just a question or two—" His voice trailed off, as he paused to refer to his notes. "You are a lieutenant in the Reserve Corps?"

"Yes," shortly. "Second lieutenant, to be exact."

"And you have your uniform?"

"Of course."

"Side arms?" Clark never removed his gaze from

Joe, as the latter nodded an affirmative answer to his question. "Your automatic .45 caliber army pistol, too —where is that?"

Galvanized into life, Joe sprang up. "None of your damned business!" he shouted.

Clark's uplifted hand warned him into silence. "You forget yourself, Mr. Reade!" The coroner's reproof rang through the room and Inspector Warfield, who had come to his side, dropped back a step or two. "You may go—for the present; kindly leave by the main door."

I doubted if Joe really understood he was being dismissed, for he stood glowering down at the small doctor, his eyes dark with indignation; or was it some deeper emotion which stirred him into forgetfulness of his surroundings?

"This way." The morgue master, no respecter of persons or their wishes, beckoned Joe down from the platform and led the way to the entrance.

The interest in Joe's departure ceased as his tall figure passed through the doorway, and my eyes, as well as those of the other spectators, turned expectantly to the witness room entrance. Coroner Clark had called Christine de Peyster to the platform.

Against the drab background of the cheerless room, Christine's vivid beauty showed to the greatest advantage and the reporters were not alone in craning forward to obtain a better look at her. If she were aware of the sensation her presence created, Christine concealed it admirably, and her manner was entirely

composed as she took the witness chair, after being sworn. In tones which carried softly to every ear, she responded to Clark's questions regarding her family and her length of residence in Washington.

"And for how long a period had you known Alfred Reade?" asked the coroner.

"Fully a year and a half," She loosened her fur-trimmed coat, throwing it back off her shoulders. "We met first in Paris, and later renewed our acquaintance here."

"And that acquaintance ripened into—"

"Friendship."

"Nothing warmer, madam?" prompted Clark; his cordial manner underwent an abrupt change. I, too, watched Christine with a more rapidly beating pulse. Had she forgotten her conversation with the coroner and Inspector Warfield, which I had overheard? My eyes strayed to the marriage license, lying reversed on the table close to her hand. "Didn't Mr. Reade rank first with you?"

Color mantled Christine's ivory-white cheeks. "There is no rank in friendship," she protested mildly. Coroner Clark's patience snapped short.

"Let's have an end to this fencing," he announced roughly. "Your flirtation culminated in a wager—a challenge—which Reade accepted forty-eight hours before his death, to secure this marriage license to marry you." He held up the bloodstained document so that all might see it.

Save that her breathing quickened, Christine endured

the stares, the nods and murmurs, unmoved. Coroner Clark's fist fell on the table with a resounding whack.

"Silence! We must have order or the room will be cleared." The chatter ceased and he whirled back toward the witness chair. "When did Mr. Reade show you this document, Miss de Peyster?"

"Sunday afternoon."

"Where?"

"In his garden."

"Ah, you have a key admitting you there?"

"Naturally; the gate is on my property." Christine adjusted her string of amber beads with steady fingers. "My grandfather was the original owner of that tract of land; its sale carried a right of way across what eventually became Mr. Reade's garden."

"Then Mr. Reade did not bestow the key on you?"

"He did not." Her denial was forceful. "I inherited Studio House from my uncle and the garden key was in the gate, even then."

"And did you always keep it there—in the gate?" demanded Clark; in his interest, he laid down the marriage license. I saw Christine's eyes travel from the document back to Clark.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Mr. Reade asked that no one have access to the garden, and I therefore kept the key on a hook in my living room." She forestalled Clark's next question. "Mr. Reade spent much time, money and thought on his plants and shrubs."

"When did you last use that key?" The coroner's swiftly put question was meant to confuse; his tactics failed.

"To join Mr. Reade, as I have told you." Christine met his stare calmly, and, disappointed, Clark turned back to his mass of notes.

"This garden key," he began again. "Does it hang in plain sight, and is it accessible to members of your household?"

"Yes—that is—" Without ceremony Clark cut her short.

"And your household comprises—whom?" he demanded.

"Miss Fechet and my servant, Norah Kane."

"And both of them used Reade's garden?"

"Oh, no"; quickly. "Norah never went there and Miss Fechet only occasionally."

"Was Sunday afternoon one of the occasions?" asked Clark with dry emphasis.

"Miss Fechet was not with us then," replied Christine firmly. For the first time she turned her head in my direction, and under the full glare of light from the shadeless windows I again noted the perfect contour of her figure and the deep blue of her lovely eyes. My absorption had not gone unobserved by Inspector Warfield, sitting at my elbow.

"Graceful as a panther," he whispered in my ear. "Can she be as treacherous?"

I was spared answering, for at that instant I caught Christine de Peyster's eyes; they lighted with recog-

nition. A cool bow as I made a motion to rise, and she had turned back to Coroner Clark.

"Miss de Peyster." The coroner lifted the marriage license. "Did you tell Miss Fechet of the existence of this document?"

"No."

"Why not?" Clark crossed the platform. "Wasn't Miss Fechet in your confidence?"

"Certainly she was—"

"But not to the extent of confiding so important an item of news as this"—waving the license before Christine. Startled, she shrank back and Clark's eyes lit in triumph; at last he had found a vulnerable point of attack. "Was it because Miss Fechet was a formidable rival in Reade's affections?"

"It was not!" Shaken out of her calm, Christine broke into low, rapid speech. "Claire Fechet was no rival of mine; her affections were otherwise engaged."

"You imply"—eagerness crept into Clark's uplifted voice—"Miss Fechet is engaged. Who is the lucky man?"

"That," Christine's nerves had steadied, "I decline to tell you."

CHAPTER XV

The Verdict

IT was long past the lunch hour, but no spectators left. In expectant silence they waited, as Christine de Peyster was excused by the coroner, and in silence they witnessed the meeting halfway down the aisle between Christine and Claire Fechet, the latter advancing under the guidance of the morgue master. A quick, searching look passed between the two friends, then, white and unsmiling, Claire came forward and mounted the platform steps. Her voice was barely audible as she took the oath, but it strengthened when, once in the witness chair, she answered Coroner Clark's preliminary questions.

"You say that you assumed your secretarial position with the late Alfred Reade six months ago," went on Clark, after a brief pause, in which he held a whispered consultation with the District Attorney. The latter had entered some twenty minutes earlier, and responding to Inspector Warfield's greeting in an undertone, had sat down at the coroner's table. "What were your hours of work?"

"They varied, according to the amount of correspondence." Gaining confidence, Claire sat back more at ease. "Some days I was there continuously from nine in the morning until five in the afternoon; at

other times only the morning hours were required by Mr. Reade."

"Then you handled all Mr. Reade's letters?"

"Not all; not his personal mail," she corrected quickly. "That he attended to himself."

Clark edged closer to the witness chair. "Were your relations with your employer always cordial?"

"Yes." She swallowed hard, striving to make her voice less husky. "Yes."

"Speak louder," cautioned Clark brusquely. "Did Mr. Reade approve of his nephew's attentions to you?"

The question was the first intimation she had of the personal angle the examination would take, and she shrank back instinctively, while a wave of color surged up into her white cheeks.

I had edged my chair closer to the platform and from there could look up at Claire except when the morgue master obtruded his burly figure between me and the platform when he swore in the witnesses. Now, as I watched her, my fingers closed and unclosed in unconscious imitation of her own as I read in her changing expression a realization of the ordeal confronting her.

"Come, Miss Fechet; we await your answer," prompted Clark. "Did Mr. Reade approve of his nephew's attentions to you?"

"No." The admission was almost a whisper.

"On what grounds?" persisted Clark.

"Too young—too poor." She raised her voice as a cry of "Louder" came from the back of the room. Clark rapped for order.

"Did his disapproval reach the stage of a quarrel—with his nephew?" he demanded, a second later.

"No, never!" Her denial was instant. "Mr. Reade never took either one of us seriously enough for that."

I caught the look Clark exchanged with the District Attorney, and my spirits sank; their quick byplay indicated total unbelief in Claire's statement.

"Are you and young Mr. Reade engaged?" asked the coroner.

"No." Her eyes were downcast but the monosyllable rang out clearly.

"Were you ever engaged?"

Claire's head flew up. I had thought her eyes gray in color; now they were neither blue nor gray nor green, but a lovely blending of all three—and therein lay their captivating charm.

"I decline to answer!"

"On what grounds, Miss Fechet?" Clark's silky tones concealed anger, judging from his scowl.

"The question is personal and has no bearing on this investigation."

"I am the best judge of that," retorted Clark, and waited; so did Claire, in a silence which her determined pose showed she did not intend to break. "So you did not accept the nephew," commented the coroner, drawling his words that his meaning might sink in. "Were you any more kindly disposed toward his uncle?"

"Sir!" Her indignation choked her. "You dare to infer—"

"What others repeat," his smile was almost a sneer, "that you encouraged the elder Mr. Reade."

"I did not!" Claire turned on him like a tiger-cat, her eyes blazing. "I never wanted Mr. Reade's attentions—I knew too much about him!"

"And where did you gain your extensive knowledge?" demanded Clark. "From personal experience?"

Her cheeks flamed scarlet. "You are insufferable!"

"Madam, no personalities, please." The coroner's virtuous tones kindled Claire's wrath afresh.

"Your insinuations are an affront," she declared, reckless of consequences. "I am here to answer questions—not to be insulted."

"Miss Fechet, kindly moderate your language." Clark spoke with authority and, silenced, Claire sank back in her chair. He turned to consult his notes. "You said your relations with Mr. Reade were cordial, yet now you declare you never wished him around. Your stand is inconsistent, Miss Fechet." He waited for comment, but none came. "Why did Mr. Reade send you, on Sunday night, a key to his front door?"

"That I might get in early on Monday morning."

"And why did he wish you there especially early?"

"He wished me to witness a deed which Mr. Burton was bringing to him."

"And this key was handed to you by Grymes in the presence of young Joseph Reade?"

"It was."

"And did Joseph Reade know why it was sent to you?"

"Of course; I told him," simply, and Clark's eyes were the first to fall before her scornful gaze.

"And did you then tell Joseph Reade also, that your name was not on his uncle's marriage license?"

"Certainly not; Joe left that night no wiser on the subject—than you," and Claire planted her sting with a smile, her first since entering the room.

"Ah!" With sparkling eyes, Clark confronted her. "You admit knowledge of the marriage license, yet yesterday you denied that either Miss de Peyster or Alfred Reade told you of it. How did you learn of the document—the document found clenched in the murdered man's hand?"

The coroner expected confusion, tears; instead his impassioned appeal was met with a burst of girlish laughter.

"Joseph Reade told me of the license when he asked me if my name was on it," gasped Claire, striving to conquer her tendency to hysterics. Leaning forward, the District Attorney handed her a glass of water, while Clark hid his discomfiture by blowing his nose loudly.

"Miss Fechet," pocketing his handkerchief with a flourish, the coroner resumed his examination of the witness, "when did you last see Alfred Reade?"

"Sunday night at the theater." She had regained her composure to some extent. "He and Miss de Peyster were together."

"Did you speak?"

"No."

Clark fiddled with his pencil, apparently in doubt; then he glanced up at Claire.

"Later Sunday night, did you speak to Alfred Reade when he and Miss de Peyster returned to Studio House?" he asked.

"No; I had gone to my room."

"Did you speak to Miss de Peyster?" persisted Clark.

"Only to say good night."

"Did she know you planned to go early to work the following morning?" asked the coroner, with impressive emphasis.

"There was nothing planned about it," broke in Claire hotly; "not on my part. I take exception, sir, to your insinuation. I went to Mr. Reade's home on Monday as I went on other occasions—in my secretarial capacity only."

Clark smiled tolerantly at her impetuous outburst and adroitly switched the tenor of his question. "You did not, then, tell Miss de Peyster that Reade had sent you the key to his house?"

"I may have; I don't recall." A sudden uneasiness betrayed agitation, and Clark was quick to notice it.

"Why *did* Reade send you that key, Miss Fechet?" he demanded. "Were you to get there at so early an hour that he could not admit you himself?"

"He was never an early riser." She spoke hastily, clipping her words. "I gathered that Mr. Reade wished me to admit Mr. Burton and—and—ask him to wait." The lameness of her explanation brought a smile to

Clark's lips. "As it was I got there only a few minutes before Mr. Burton's arrival."

"And when did you leave Studio House to go there?"

"At twenty minutes past eight." Claire's pat reply apparently satisfied. But, appalled, I straightened up and looked away from the slim young figure in the witness chair. Norah had implied a far earlier departure on Claire's part and—there was Norah now, under escort of Headquarters Detective Wilson, just descending from a police car. They disappeared from my line of vision and I turned my back on the window through which I had been gazing into the street. My sensations were too mixed to follow clearly Claire's testimony regarding the discovery of the murder.

"Miss Fechet"—Clark pushed aside the accumulated papers on his table and bent forward—"you have sworn upon the Bible to tell the truth and nothing but the truth; to do otherwise is perjury." He paused to watch the effect of his warning; save that she started slightly, Claire waited in unbroken silence for him to continue.

"Did Alfred Reade make love to you?" Hints and innuendoes she had skillfully side-stepped, but the direct question caught her unprepared. Her eyes strayed from Clark to the sea of faces confronting her and she recoiled, horrified by the concentrated stares of the spectators—to bare her innermost feelings, before them! Grimly, Coroner Clark enjoyed her struggle to master her emotions. "And did you encourage his attentions?"

"Yes—no!" She stopped, overcome as she tried to keep up with his questions; then, casting prudence to the winds, she gave vent to her outraged feelings. "I hated him, hated him!" Her voice rose in a crescendo of sound, "always I hated him!"

The scraping of Coroner Clark's chair on the wooden floor was echoed by mine as I, too, rose, but Inspector Warfield's firm grip on my arm stopped my progress to Claire's side.

"Miss Fechet, you may retire." Clark's harsh tones acted as a spur and Claire, disdaining his helping hand, left the platform and headed for the entrance, her eyes shining like living coals of fire against the ghastly pallor of her face.

"Wait! Wait!" Warfield's urgent whisper stayed my departure and I resumed my seat as a neatly dressed, middle-aged man took his stand on the platform and waited for the morgue master to administer the oath.

"Hugh Lawson Miles is my full name," he announced a few moments later in answer to the coroner's question, and settled back in the witness chair with an air of being entirely at home. "I'm proprietor and manager of the Elite Shooting Gallery on Seventh Street."

"Did Mr. Joseph Reade ever enter your establishment?" asked Clark quickly, with the evident intention of checking Miles's loquaciousness.

"Sure, many times; Mr. Reade's an excellent pistol shot—"

"Was he always alone?"

"Well, lately he's brought a young girl." Conscious of undivided attention, Miles leaned back and contemplated us complacently. "A Miss Fechet, he called her."

With sickening foreboding I watched Clark select two photographs and hold them up so that all might see them, including the witness.

"Which of these was Mr. Reade's companion, Mr. Miles?" he asked.

Unhesitatingly Miles pointed to the likeness of Claire Fechet, and Clark put down her photograph and laid that of Christine de Peyster alongside it.

"Mr. Reade taught Miss Fechet to use his pistol," went on Miles, only to be again interrupted.

"What kind of a pistol?" questioned Clark.

"A .45 caliber army automatic." Miles cleared his throat. "Miss Fechet got so she could hit the target six times out of ten tries."

"That's all, sir; you may go." The curt discharge took Miles's breath away. Slow in finding his feet, he was still descending the short flight of steps from the platform when Norah Kane marched up them.

Norah's rich Irish brogue was a pleasing contrast to the former witness's down-east twang and the air of tension among the spectators relaxed during her preliminary examination. But my sense of uneasiness grew as I listened to Norah's statement that she had been away all Sunday evening, only returning to Studio House after Christine and Claire. She had gone immediately to her own bedroom and she ended:

"I shlept loike the dead an' niver a sound did I hear, sor, the whole night through."

"Were you downstairs at the usual hour on Monday morning?" asked the coroner.

"Indade, an' I was." Upset at thought being slack in her work, she immediately expanded her statement. "I set me foot in the kitchen in plenty of toime to git breakfast for Miss Claire, but she was off an' away by siven o'clock."

"Thanks, Norah; that's all!" And Clark bundled the bewildered Irishwoman off the platform.

My spine was boring into the folding chair but no one could have pried me loose from my uncomfortable perch as Dr. Wyant passed down the aisle. In a fever of impatience, Coroner Clark rushed through the formalities.

His manner unhurried and in an even, composed voice, Dr. Wyant corroborated the testimony given by his office boy, Sylvester, and by Joseph Reade, as to the events which took place in his office on Sunday afternoon.

"Dr. Wyant"—Clark looked up from his notes—"young Reade stated that on going to Studio House after the theater with Miss Fechet, he met you at the door."

"Quite true; I was there."

"Wasn't that an unusual hour to call at Studio House?"

"I hadn't called there," replied Wyant tranquilly. "I was exercising my dog with a walk around the block

and we met quite accidentally on Miss de Peyster's doorstep."

"Did you observe anything unusual in Miss Fechet's demeanor?"

The doctor's hesitation was palpable to all. "She was crying," he admitted; "I could see that her cheeks were wet as she brushed by me to enter the house."

"Ah!" The coroner rubbed his hands in satisfaction. "As you walked home, did Mr. Reade vouchsafe any explanation?"

"He said that he had questioned Miss Fechet about the marriage license." Wyant's roving glance lighted on me and then passed to Warfield. "And Mr. Reade added that she had declined to discuss the subject."

"I see." Clark drummed on the table; an irritating sound, or else my nerves were strung too high to pass over the useless noise. "Did you know that young Mr. Reade had an automatic pistol?"

"Yes, he made no secret of it." Wyant's eyebrows rose questioningly.

"And when did you last see that gun?"

"On Saturday—"

"Where?"

Wyant paused. "Must I answer that?" he asked and, as I saw the jury, to a man, lean expectantly forward, I could have wrung Wyant's neck.

"You must!" Clark almost barked the words. "Go on, doctor; tell us where you last saw Joe Reade's automatic pistol."

"In Studio House"—Wyant had difficulty in speak-

ing, and cleared his throat nervously—"lying in Miss Fechet's work basket."

Restraining an insane desire to trip up Dr. Wyant as his long and ungainly legs passed me on leaving the platform, I looked behind him at Clark.

Coming forward to the edge of the platform, the coroner faced the jury. His rapidly spoken words at first made little impression; then I sat taut, listening to his summing up.

"Reliable witnesses have proven first: that Miss Fechet is a fair shot with an automatic army pistol; that that pistol was in her possession on Saturday; that Alfred Reade came to his death at a quarter of eight Monday morning; that she had the only available key to the front door of the Reade mansion and that she was found alone in the house with the dead man." Clark paused and drew a long breath. "Miss Fechet herself admitted in no uncertain terms that she hated her employer— Gentlemen, the case rests with you."

The minutes dragged interminably, but we sat on, awaiting the return of the jury. Suddenly the opening of the door and the shuffling of feet heralded the approach of the twelve men. Taller than those standing by me, I looked over a row of heads and straight into the eyes of the agitated foreman of the jury. His voice rose and fell as his feelings swayed him, to ring out clearly at the last:

"That Claire Fechet be held for action by the Grand Jury."

The tension snapped and the spectators, until then

held in check; milled around me; a minute later I had cleared a path to the platform and was the first to reach the District Attorney, with Inspector Warfield a close second.

CHAPTER XVI

Complications

"WE will be as welcome as the plague," I remarked. In reply, Inspector Warfield for the third time lifted the knocker of the front door of Studio House, and brought it down with a vigorous whang. "Nobody home, apparently." My hopeful tone brought a sharp look from my companion.

"Whoever stays here is averse to answering the door," he grumbled, and swung his fist, instead of the brass knocker, against the wooden panels. "Why any one as modernistic as Miss de Peyster does away with electric bells, beats me!" He gave the door a final and resounding thump and backed down the steps. "You'll have to call again, Mr. Burton, to get your belongings; come along, sir."

Nothing loath, I accompanied the inspector up the street and around the corner. We were neither of us in a talkative mood since parting with the District Attorney at the City Court House, and the trip in Warfield's car had been made in comparative silence and with several stops en route to Studio House. It had taken considerable time and influence to arrange bail for Claire Fechet, but at last the necessary legal forms had been complied with. I had tried to have a word

with Claire as we came out on the court house steps, but the rush of reporters and camera men proved an effectual barrier. Side by side, Christine and Claire sped down a narrow path, aided by a sympathetic court official, and when I finally pushed my way to the sidewalk, Christine's car was a speck in the distance. Behind it trailed another and Warfield, with a satisfied smirk, murmured, "Police car," before he extended an invitation to me to ride uptown with him.

A group of morbidly inclined idlers before the Reade mansion made way for us as we went up the front steps, where lounged a blue-coated policeman.

"Any one been here?" inquired Warfield, as the guard saluted.

"No, sir; not since the District Attorney went away." The policeman stood aside as the inspector unlocked the front door. "Andy Grymes came earlier—"

"What for?" broke in Warfield.

"To ask if any mail had been left for him or his wife." The man smiled expansively at some recollection. "Andy used considerable language when he learned Todd had given all mail to the District Attorney."

A grunt was Warfield's contribution to the conversation; then he muttered a belated "Thanks," and we were inside the mansion.

The lower floor presented much the same appearance it had twenty-four hours previously. Already it had taken on the semblance of a deserted house, and our

footsteps echoed weirdly as we proceeded on our tour of inspection.

"The house was locked up just as securely yesterday morning," I commented, as Warfield came abreast of me in the living room. "How, in the devil's name, did the murderer get in and how get away without leaving a single clue behind!"

The inspector grinned at me. "The question's settled—by the verdict of the coroner's inquest."

"By—! It's not!" The oath ripped from me. "I'll stake my reputation Claire Fechet never shot Alfred Reade."

"But the evidence—"

"Circumstantial, every bit of it!" contemptuously. Warfield's unbelieving smile was a further aggravation. "You and the coroner have swallowed the obvious—hook, line and sinker."

Warfield winced. "Go easy in your condemnation," he cautioned. "Your own words just now provide the answer—no one but Claire Fechet could enter this house without leaving some clue—"

"Wait"—I broke in—"suppose that Reade, instead of closing the front door Monday morning after Todd's departure, absent-mindedly left it ajar."

The idea was not to Warfield's liking. "Suppose—suppose—bah!" he ejaculated. "We have the criminal under lock and key—that is, she would be if you and Miss de Peyster hadn't bailed her out. Must have used all of that ten thousand dollars, eh?"

The guess was too close to the truth to please me. "That," I pointed out, "is none of your affair."

"No offense meant, Mr. Burton." Warfield's tone was apologetic and his grim mouth relaxed into a friendly smile. "You'll have to admit, though, that everything indicates Reade kept this house under lock and key—why?"

"Because he feared intrusion."

"Undoubtedly; then would he go off absent-mindedly and leave the front door invitingly open—ajar, if you like that term better?"

"He might have"; tenaciously I clung to my theory. "Why not ask Todd if he closed the front door?"

Inspector Warfield reached for the telephone and, while he talked with the city post office, I went over to the door opening into the garden. It was locked, with the drop latch down, just as we had found it the day before. No one had forced an entrance there, that was certain. Even if the intruder had had a duplicate key, the drop latch would still have barred his entrance. No, most decidedly, no one had come in that way—unless Alfred Reade admitted his visitor.

"Come out in the garden," I called over my shoulder and, turning the key as I pushed up the drop latch, I held open the door. Warfield stopped to gather up some documents left by the telephone and then followed me.

That Alfred Reade had taken pride in his garden, I readily believed as I crossed the velvetlike lawn. Rose bushes and climbing roses were everywhere and the

warm April sunshine had brought out tiny new shoots on them, while the flowering shrubs had already budded into beauty. But the glory of the garden at that season was the row of magnolia trees in full bloom. With one accord Warfield and I headed for them. Beneath their shade were a number of rustic benches and chairs, the latter clustered close to a round table. Without ceremony I selected one of the chairs and the inspector made himself comfortable in another.

"What a place to lounge!" he exclaimed, glancing skyward through the gorgeous magnolia flowers. "And to flirt!"

The last was so decidedly an afterthought that I laughed; my mirth was cut short by Warfield's frown.

"I'm serious, Mr. Burton," he protested. "Reade was trying a dangerous game—playing Claire Fechet off against Christine de Peyster. Which one really had his affections?"

I sat bolt upright, my sense of comfort gone. On the painted photograph of Christine, Reade had written "Beautiful White Devil—" Could he truly have loved a woman he so described? That he wished to marry her, the license bore mute testimony. She had birth and breeding, but no more so than Claire; she had money—but Reade did not need to marry for money.

Profoundly puzzled, I sat quiet as Warfield pored over the papers he had brought with him from Reade's living room. From where we were I caught occasional glimpses of the high walls of the Alamo Apartment

House as the stiff breeze swayed the branches above us. Rising, I sauntered down a right-hand path and came abreast of a row of windows. They were all far above my head, but an active man could drop from any one of them into the garden with no damage to himself, save soiling his clothes. With head tilted backward, I tried to recognize the windows belonging to Dr. Wyant's apartment, which I had been in the day before for so brief a period.

"The fourth from the end." Inspector Warfield caught up with me. "I counted them off this morning and—" He looked at me inquiringly. "What's your particular interest in Dr. Wyant's accessibility to Reade's garden?"

His question passed unanswered as I, too, counted off the windows; ah, the one which I had seen lighted at two that morning was the window Warfield identified as belonging to Dr. Wyant's suite of rooms. Then Mrs. Andy Grymes had gone to his office at that unconventional hour instead of calling in the doctor to see her.

"Where are Mrs. Grymes' living quarters?" I asked.

"Andy and she have a one room and bath apartment in the opposite corridor from Wyant." The inspector looked at me inquiringly. "Why such interest in the Grymes' whereabouts?"

"They are a curious couple," I replied shortly, and turned my back on the Alamo. "Look, Warfield, those cherry trees across the way and the magnolias form a natural bower; any one could bolt out of Reade's liv-

ing room and cross over here without being seen, unless he wished to come out in the open."

Warfield stared about with lively interest. "True," he agreed, a minute later, "but a person could not scale the wall to Wyant's window without assistance."

I linked my arm in his and we strolled along the path which approached the street wall. "I noticed yesterday morning," I began, pausing to admire a shrub which caught my fancy, "when we were at Dr. Wyant's that Sylvester had been washing the window of his private office and a ladder, on which were pail and cloths, rested on Reade's garden path and against the doctor's window sill."

Warfield's interest was tinged with chagrin. "I failed to see the ladder. . . ."

"Because you were too busy trying to convict Miss Fechet," I retorted. That I had aroused the inspector's ire, his reddened face testified.

"What are you driving at?" he demanded with heat. "Some one might leave Wyant's office, the way you point out, sir, but first, you've got to get that person into Reade's home."

I was closer to the house than Warfield and was the first to observe the closed door.

"We may have to find a way into the mansion ourselves, Warfield," I exclaimed. "Look, we are shut out." And running forward, I pushed against the living room door—to no avail.

A second later Warfield thrust the key into its hole; the wards of the lock fell back, for we detected the faint

click made by them, but the door still resisted our efforts to open it.

"The latch has dropped in place." Warfield's disgust was plain. "No use knocking, Mr. Burton; the guard can't enter the house to let us in, for I have the key to the front door, and the side door and all the windows are locked."

"Then it's over the garden wall for us." I headed for the path paralleling the street. But my enthusiasm for that method of departure cooled at sight of the iron spikes and broken glass on the top of the wall.

"I'm no athlete," grumbled Warfield. "Suppose we try Miss de Peyster's garden gate."

Passing under the magnolia trees and around the rustic furniture, we came upon what, in olden times, would have been termed a postern gate. Overshadowed by the brick wall in which it was set, its weather-stained boards were indistinguishable at any great distance.

"No bell here!" Warfield swore softly under his breath. "Well, let's hope that some one within Studio House will hear us."

The inspector's rat-a-tat-tat awoke the echoes and nothing more. Tiring of watching him, I moved off. The brick wall of Studio House, so far as I could see, was likewise protected by spikes and broken glass, but as I continued my investigations farther to the left, I noticed that the vines trailing over the bricks changed in foliage and thickness. Going closer I recognized the trumpet vine. It hung down in a heavy clump at

the extreme left. Reaching up, I seized one of the branches and swung clear of the ground—it held my weight. Hand over hand, I went up the wall, bracing my feet wherever they found resting place. Within a few seconds I was crouching on the top of the wall and from there hailed Warfield. With my assistance and the friendly trumpet vine, he clambered up beside me and sat wiping perspiration and grime from his face and hands.

"This neighborhood must be the birthplace of the seven sleepers!" He turned and surveyed the deserted office buildings. "I'll recommend the business district after 5 P.M. for insomnia. Well, let's get away from here."

The trunk of the trumpet vine, old when that section of the capital city was new, formed a natural bridge down which we climbed with ease, but once on the de Peyster property, I hesitated; not so, Warfield. Striding over to the terrace, he tried to open the long French doors.

"Locked, every damned one of 'em!" He gazed about. "And not another exit from this garden!" In sheer exasperation, he reached down, picked up a loose stone and heaved it through a glass panel.

"It will do you no good," I exclaimed. "The keys to the French doors are not in their locks."

That my surmise was right, I judged from his expression. But as Warfield withdrew his arm from the opening he had made, a scream came faintly to us. Cupping my hands over my eyes, I peered inside the

house, and distinguished a woman in white standing by the fireplace.

"Let us in," I called through Warfield's hole. Slowly, very slowly, Christine de Peyster approached, her face ghastly.

"You, Mr. Burton!" Her moving lips conveyed her exclamation rather than her voice, pitched too low to carry distinctly through the small hole. Turning back to a table, she pulled out a drawer and in her haste scattered papers right and left. When she next approached, she held a door key in her hand.

"Well, that's that!" Warfield walked into Studio House exuding satisfaction. "Don't run away, Miss de Peyster; we wish to see you."

That the wish was not mutual was plain from the reluctance with which Christine heeded his request. Turning, she took her stand at one end of the big sofa as Warfield selected a chair close at hand.

"Why do you break in like a thief in the night, Inspector?" she asked, and I caught the rebellious flash in her blue eyes. Evidently the fright we had given her had its reaction in bitter anger at the cause.

Instead of explanation or apology, Warfield caught her up instantly.

"Why do you dread intrusion as much as Alfred Reade?" he demanded.

"Your police methods supply the reason," was her spirited reply. Christine's blood was up. "Our privacy invaded; our car followed—why, even in the

witness room at the morgue, spies sat by us. Is it any wonder we lock ourselves in?"

"My dear madam"—Warfield held out a deprecating hand—"we are only striving to learn the truth."

"And with you, the end justifies the means." Christine faced about so as to include me in the conversation. "Well, go on; I am waiting—patiently."

Warfield's lips curled slightly; her attitude contradicted the adverb.

"We came for the front-door key which Miss Fechet used to enter the Reade mansion on Monday morning and which"—he paused significantly—"she neglected to turn over to the District Attorney."

"The neglect was his," retorted Christine. "His request for it came after Claire returned the key—"

"To whom?"

"Grymes." She observed Warfield's change of expression and was instantly on the defensive. "Why should Claire keep the key?"

"To be sure, why should she?"—the inspector's smile would have goaded a less tempestuous nature into retaliation. "The key had served Miss Fechet's purpose."

Christine stepped back and struck a small bronze gong on a side table. "Will you leave now, at once, or"—head up, eyes alight, she confronted Warfield as that individual found his feet—"wait to be arrested for illegal entry?" and her gesture indicated the shattered pane of glass in the French window.

The inspector stared at her in complete discomfiture.

"You have me there, Miss de Peyster," he acknowledged. "I'm in wrong—"

"And not for the first time." Christine had taken the bit in her teeth. "It is due to your blundering, your stupidity, that Claire"—her voice trembled with emotion—"has been implicated. Do you think I will forget or forgive what you and Coroner Clark made her suffer to-day?"

Warfield shrugged. "The evidence in hand—"

She never let him finish. "The evidence in hand," she repeated, and the scorn in her voice crimsoned the inspector's face. "Did you have in hand Joe's automatic pistol which *you* claim was used to kill Alfred? Have you even tried to trace its present whereabouts?"

Warfield, retreating before Christine, as the latter advanced, mistook his sense of direction and instead of stepping backward into the front entry, bumped into Claire Fechet, standing in the small passageway leading to the girls' suite of rooms. Whether she had been listening to us, or whether her attention was solely directed to a built-in wall cupboard, its shelves piled high with household linen, I neither knew nor cared, for the impact of Warfield's body slued Claire around and her clutching fingers dislodged a pile of bath towels —their slide to the floor disclosed an automatic pistol left lying on the bare shelf.

Clinging together, the two women waited in speechless suspense. Sick with apprehension, I turned from Claire's horrified stare and confronted Warfield. Together we examined the pistol.

"An army gun, .45 caliber!" The inspector's exultant shout penetrated my dazed faculties as I continued to gaze in stupefaction at the identifying marks: U.S. Property—.45 caliber. Model 1928. No. 333-O-777.

The familiar combination of numbers pierced my understanding—the pistol was mine, lost in Studio House the night before.

"The District Attorney will be glad to see you," Warfield barked the threat at Christine, "and this"—tapping the pistol with dread significance.

CHAPTER XVII

A Matter of No Importance

"THAT'S my gun!" Reaching over I took the automatic pistol from Warfield. Too thunderstruck to protest, he stood gaping at me. "I carelessly neglected to pack it in my grip, and apologize for leaving it around where it would confuse"—my eyes sought Claire—"Miss Fechet."

Incapable of speech Claire sank down in the nearest chair, while terror gave place to dawning hope in her white, set countenance.

"It's yours, really yours?" she gasped, and incredulity struggled with unbelief in her expressive glance. "But, why, Mr. Burton, did you place it among our belongings?"

It was an embarrassing question and conscious of the suspicious stares of my companions, my panic grew. I was not prepared to admit that I had no idea how the gun left my possession the night before; not, at least, until I had had an opportunity to further investigate its disappearance.

"I left in a hurry." My apologetic smile was the best I could muster under the circumstances. "And Warfield had warned me against carrying a gun in the city, so—so—I slipped it in your linen closet, Miss de Peyster, for safe-keeping until my return."

My lame explanation was received with open suspicion by Warfield, but Christine came to my rescue swiftly.

"Are you always so—so careless with your belongings?" she asked.

"He'll not have another chance to leave this gun around." Warfield took it back. Handling the automatic deftly, he examined it with minute care; then, apparently satisfied, pocketed the gun, first wrapping it in a handkerchief. "Gather up your traps, Mr. Burton, and come along."

"Must you go?" Christine's protest was courtesy itself, but all warmth and genuine cordiality were lacking. I colored to the roots of my hair; I had been a boor the night before and now—I had outstayed my welcome.

Giving me no chance to do more than mumble some idiotic platitudes and excuses, to which no one paid heed, Christine headed for the front entry and by so doing kept abreast of Inspector Warfield. I started after them, then turned back impulsively and tiptoed over to the figure crouching motionless in her chair.

"Miss Fechet," Claire raised her head, startled by my fervid whisper. "Will you not regard me as a friend—a trusted friend?" For one long minute we faced each other, then her eyes fell before my pleading gaze.

"And if I do"—I barely caught the words as they faltered on her lips. "What then?"

"Let me help." I had captured her hand. "My only

desire is to be of service." The fingers, entwined in mine, relaxed their grasp. "But to accomplish results, will you answer me truly?" Her "yes" was faint, but my heart throbbed high with hope. "Did you carry Reade's house key with you to the theater on Sunday night?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." She met my eyes with a frankness which disarmed criticism. "Joe and I were just leaving, when Andy Grymes came to the door; as the chauffeur ran down the steps, I turned back and laid the key on the console table in the front hall."

"Was it still there when you returned?"

"Why—yes." Her hesitancy was but too apparent. Crimsoning, she added in feverish haste, "I was tired, overwrought, and did not think of the key again until I had to use it the next morning."

"How long was that key out of your possession?" I demanded, and the urgency of my whisper drained the blood from her cheeks—or was it the question itself? "You *must* tell me, Miss Fechet. I'll not betray your confidence." Still she kept silence, her eyes boring into mine. "You left Reade's house key on the console table until—when?"

"Until a quarter past eight, Monday morning."

Chilled, I edged back. "Your statements and Norah's testimony conflict; she declares you went away at seven, Monday morning—"

"So I did." The confession forced itself through

her trembling lips, "but I came back to get the key I had forgotten, and left for the Reade mansion at twenty minutes after eight, as I told the coroner on the witness stand. Norah did not see me either return or leave here the second time."

My breath completely taken away by her simple explanation, I could only stare at Claire, too dumbfounded to express my feelings verbally.

"Where did you go that first time? Why didn't you tell the coroner?" As I got back my powers of speech, questions tumbled over each other. "Don't you see that this completely exonerates you of any complicity in Reade's murder?"

My excitement communicated itself to her. "Coroner Clark asked me when I left here to go to work," she protested. "I told him the truth."

"But why not have gone farther? Why not have told the whole truth?"

"I—I—couldn't be certain of finding a witness"—her evasive answer was barely audible. "The girl in the shop was a stranger and—and—at that early hour I met no one that I knew on the way."

"What store was it?"

"The Variety Stationery Shop—an errand for Christine." The explanation came in short, jerky sentences. "A matter of no importance."

I considered Claire thoughtfully. A matter of no importance, and yet she had hurried to the shop in complete forgetfulness of Reade's house key!

The opening and closing of a distant door broke the

stillness and the chances of interruption made me reckless of consequences.

"Tell me," I bent down until my lips were close to her ear, "why did you refuse to tell Joe Reade that your name was not on the marriage certificate?"

To complete my discomfiture, her eyes filled with tears. "He demanded the information as one who has a right and—and—I—I resented his attitude." With a curious sinking of my heart, I interrupted her stumbling, halting speech.

"So Joe left you believing that you might be planning to marry his uncle?" She nodded and a tear splashed down on her hand. Hastily I strove to divert her attention. "Where do you keep your work basket?"

"Anywhere I happen to be," promptly, and observing my disappointment, added: "I use it only for pick-up work here at home."

Mechanically I stooped over and restored her handkerchief which had rolled to the floor. "And my pistol?" I questioned impetuously. "How did it really get in your linen closet?"

Her startled wonder gave place to hot resentment. "Your joke is ill-timed, Mr. Burton. Or do you dare imply I stole it from you?"

"I'll dare all—for you," I whispered passionately. "Tell me truly, where is Joe's gun?"

In her ghastly countenance, I read refusal. Again I had blundered; but with the tenacity of despair I

persisted. "Whom are you shielding, Claire?" Stony silence was my only answer.

Pungent tobacco smoke drifted our way, penetrating my bewildered senses and I looked up and over the chair back; Christine was by the fireplace and, by her expression, enjoying her cigarette.

"Have one," she called, extending a package. Feeling decidedly foolish I scrambled from my kneeling position by Claire and crossed over to my hostess.

"Thanks; may I have a Dimitrino?"

My bland request met with a courteous shake of Christine's sleek head. "I'm sorry, but Alfred Reade took the last package. I can recommend these," again she proffered the Ivanoffs. "Remember, Claire, to ask Dr. Wyant to bring us some more Dimitrinos." Her polite conversational tones deepened to a more personal pitch. "Inspector Warfield has your grip, Mr. Burton, and—"

"I'll join him at once." I bowed to both of them and moved off quickly, but at the door I paused, to find that Christine had followed me. "I haven't thanked you for your hospitality, your kindness of yesterday—" I floundered hopelessly as I encountered her direct and searching gaze. "I deserved Dr. Wyant's rebuke."

"Hush!" She took my extended hand. Was it fancy—did I feel the faintest pressure of her fingers? "Good-by," and the door closed softly between us.

Inspector Warfield was seated at Reade's desk when I entered, four minutes later. I verified the time by a

covert glance at the clock; the act did not go unnoticed, however.

"I covered the ground in four minutes and a half, but your legs are longer," Warfield commented dryly. "Four minutes and a half, only, required to get here in this room from Studio House via the street." His eyes strayed to the living room door, now standing invitingly open. "Three minutes from Miss de Peyster's yard via Reade's garden path."

Instead of answering I walked over to the door; Christine's garden gate and Dr. Wyant's window were equidistant from where I stood, except that coming from the latter place one walked directly across the open lawn.

"Mr. Burton." On hearing my name, I turned back and faced the inspector. "How did that gun get out of your possession?" He scrutinized me closely as he followed my description of my night's experiences. "So any one of the four—Miss de Peyster, Miss Fechet, Dr. Wyant or Norah may have carried off the automatic?"

"We can eliminate Norah," I interrupted hastily.

"To be sure." Warfield still regarded me with disconcerting intentness. "Miss Fechet is a damn smart girl."

"Your opinion of her varies with the wind," I scoffed. "Not so long ago you considered that she had no more brains than to contemplate suicide."

"Well," he drawled. A match flared up and he held the flame against the tobacco in his pipe, then blew it

out. "I'm thinking that it was a grand-stand play to get a gun, not Joe's, back in our hands—a gun that was manifestly not used to kill Alfred Reade. A clever scheme." He puffed hard at his pipe for a second. "Spoiled by your claiming the gun." Warfield gave way to mirth. "You sure spilled the beans for her," and he chuckled again.

Gloomily, I walked about the living room. The inspector's line of reasoning was sound; had my fears for Claire blinded me completely?

"Where's my gun?"

My demand sobered Warfield. "Meade is making tests for finger prints." He eyed me curiously. "When did you see service in the army, Mr. Burton?"

"During the World War," shortly. "The gun is one I picked up in the Argonne trenches; I have no idea who was the original owner. I kept it as a souvenir." Moving over to the smoking stand, I opened a cigarette box; within it were fifty or more cigarettes. Tilting the box I let them roll out on the stand—every one of them bore the initials of Washington's most fashionable club, "M.C." Thoughtfully I returned the lot to the brass box, reserving one for myself; Grymes had told the truth as to Reade's preference for Metropolitan Club cigarettes; had Christine been equally truthful in stating that Reade had taken her Dimitrinos? If so, what more likely than that he had had one in his hand on Sunday night, gone into the housekeeper's room to close the window, inadvertently left open, and, in closing it, dropped the Dimitrino, unsmoked, on the win-

dow ledge? But Christine had also inferred that the Dimitrinos were supplied by Dr. Wyant. . . .

"Sorry to be late, Inspector." Todd's voice boomed through the stillness and Warfield laid aside his pipe as the postman came forward. "Was it anything important, sir?"

"Was the front door closed when you left Reade Monday morning?" asked Warfield.

"It was, sir—"

"And no one could get in?" I came up to him in my eagerness.

"It was slammed shut." Todd spoke with conviction. "And I distinctly heard the click of the lock." He looked at us inquiringly. "Wouldn't it have been possible for some one to have had a duplicate key made?" he asked. "Some one who waited his chance to get in the house when the servants were away?" The inspector shook his head.

"These are not regular stock locks." Warfield laid his hand on the garden door. "Each individual lock is keyed differently, and to get duplicate keys it would be necessary to send to the factory." He drew out a telegram, one of the documents I had seen earlier, lying by the telephone. "This wire from the Yale plant states that no one has applied for a duplicate key to any lock in this house."

Todd whistled. "Mr. Reade must have had an abnormal fear of some one," he exclaimed. "It's a ghastly affair, sir; and Miss Fechet—surely the young lady is not seriously involved?" He looked question-

ingly at us both. "I had to leave before the inquest adjourned."

"She's innocent!" I declared stoutly, before Warfield could speak. "And you've advanced one of the strongest arguments in her favor, Todd; had Reade feared Miss Fechet, he would never have sent her a key to his front door."

"A specious argument, nothing more," retorted Warfield, and shifted the conversation with surprising abruptness. "Is Andy Grymes always so anxious to get hold of his wife's mail, Todd?"

"Around the first of the month, he is," the latter admitted. "She asked me never to give her letters to him."

"Humph!" Warfield relighted his pipe, which had gone out. "Was there anything unusual about her mail, Todd—the postmark, for instance?"

"Generally New Orleans, sir; the address was always typed." The postman shifted his quid of tobacco from one cheek to the other with practiced ease. "I never saw her outgoing mail. Mrs. Andy isn't the kind to talk and I never learned how she felt 'bout Andy playing the ponies and the warning he got from the postal officials to lay off. I've suspected sometimes," Todd lowered his voice, "'twas Mr. Reade's influence which got him off with a reprimand."

"Very probably." I reached over and helped myself to another cigarette from Reade's stock. "By the way, Todd, I've never heard your answer to my question."

"What question, sir?" and Todd's china-blue eyes widened.

"Does Mrs. Andy drive a car?"

"Not here, sir; not to my knowledge she doesn't. . . ."

"She has no driver's permit," broke in Warfield with some testiness. "I found that out at the District Building, Mr. Burton; besides, sir"—Warfield ceased his tramp up and down in front of us and took his stand by Todd— "if Mrs. Andy had some hold on Reade, would she kill the goose that provided a home for herself and her scalawag husband?"

Silenced, but not convinced, I stared at my companions. "She had some hold on him," I declared stubbornly after a moment's thought; "otherwise Reade would never have kept Andy in his employ. But suppose, Warfield, Reade got tired of them both and threatened dismissal, and one of them retaliated by shooting him?"

"Their alibis explode that theory," retorted Warfield. "No, you are tilting at windmills, Mr. Burton, in your defense of Miss Fechet; if she's innocent, where's her alibi?"

The sneer which accompanied the question decided my actions.

"Where's the Variety Stationery Shop?" I asked.

Warfield shook his head. "Never heard of the place," he admitted, and I reached for the telephone directory.

"The shop's on Pennsylvania Avenue," broke in

Todd; "my womenfolk go there sometimes," and as I snatched up my hat, he guessed my intention. "Can I drive you there, Mr. Burton; I'm off duty for the night?"

I accepted his offer with alacrity. "Better come along, Warfield," I suggested.

"Why?" and Warfield, about to go upstairs, halted in the entrance hall.

"I'm going in search of Miss Fechet's alibi," and chuckling faintly at his surprised expression, I ran after Todd. But as we climbed into the latter's Ford, I found the inspector at my heels.

"Move over," he exclaimed, good-naturedly; "you can't lose me."

We rattled our way through the heavy four-thirty traffic and, close under the dome of the Capitol, Todd drew up before a quaint old shop on the north side of Pennsylvania Avenue, which bore on its faded awning the name: Variety Stationery Company. S. Stuntz, Proprietor.

"By the way," I hesitated a second, waiting for Todd as the latter locked his car. "Is the eight-hour law enforced in Washington?"

"Absolutely. Why?" and Warfield regarded me with lively interest.

I faced about. "Come inside," and at my suggestion they trailed along. A man, bent with years, came forward as we stared at his stock of stationery; in fact, as I looked around, the word "stationery" embraced as great a variety of articles as a modern drug

store; besides blank books, paper, pens and pencils, were artists' supplies and office equipment.

"Was your shop open on Monday morning at seven o'clock?" I asked, judging from the man's appearance that he was the proprietor.

"Yess, dot it vas." Stuntz looked hard at us, then nodded cordially to Todd. "Vy, sir?"

"Did you wait on Miss Claire Fechet at about seven-thirty that morning?" I put the question at a venture, and my spirits sank at his decided shake of the head. Either he did not know her by name or else Claire had lied to me. I caught the twinkle in Warfield's eyes. "Don't you remember Miss Fechet? She lives with Miss de Peyster, the sculptress."

The German's expression altered. "Ah, but of course; now I know." He turned back to his desk and opened a ledger, consulted it, and reaching under his counter pulled out a drawer. "Elsa vait on the yong lady; Elsa iss my niece and iss new to the buziness"—he regarded Warfield over his wire spectacles. "I hire no help; mein vife, meinself, and now Elsa, tend store, so ve are open at all hours to sell souvenirs."

"But Miss Fechet did not come for souvenirs?" The German did not let me complete my sentence.

"Nein, nein!" he exploded. "But she come to bring back vat by mistake I wrap up for Miss de Peyster"—he paused and took from the drawer a sale's bill and, unfolding it, displayed a rubber stamp—"The odder Miss, she buy a 'paid' stamp, and by mistake I give her

this—" and there on his palm lay a rubber stamp bearing the single word "Cancelled."

"Miss Vechet, you call her"—Stuntz's harsh tones broke the tension; "she vas not here at seven-thirty; see, Elsa, my niece, put the time down," and he spun the ledger around so that we could see the scribbled notation. "Miss Vechet come at seven-fifteen and vent qvickly avay."

CHAPTER XVIII

The Spider and the Fly

I ADDRESSED the envelope and inclosed my letter; it was short and uninteresting but my sister would have to be content. I could not write Marian all that was in my mind, I could not even promise to remain in Washington until she and her husband returned, as she had urged in the telegram I had found tucked under the door of their apartment—mine, for the time being. Refreshed by a bath and a change of clothing, I had eaten dinner in the café on the upper floor of the Alamo and returned to my quarters to await a telephone call from Warfield.

The tinkle of the 'phone bell came just as I selected a stamp from the supply on Marian's desk. Our conversation proved a monologue, with Inspector Warfield doing the talking, but when I hung up the receiver I had promised to join him at the Reade mansion. His invitation had been couched in imperative terms, and I made haste to leave. He had also hinted that I might be detained there until a late hour. A book, its flamboyant paper jacket proclaiming it a hit of the month, attracted my attention as I paused to switch off the reading lamp and I took up the novel and thrust it into a pocket of my overcoat.

Five minutes later the descending elevator had carried me to the first floor with express speed and, after mailing my letter, I turned back, instead of continuing my way to the street, my destination Dr. Wyant's office. Brushing past a number of persons who, like myself, were headed down the corridor, I stopped before his apartment. Before I had time to reconsider my hastily formed plan, Wyant himself threw wide his door.

"Hah!" he exclaimed; then, as I stepped more fully into view: "Mr. Burton! Did you rap? Have you been waiting long?"

"Neither the one nor the other." Surprised by his rapid-fire mode of address, I stood hesitating—I had not been invited to enter. His glance flashed past me and instinctively I, too, looked up and down the corridor; its only occupants were all strangers to me. "May I see you, doctor?" and, taking his consent for granted, I walked into his waiting room.

"Sit down, sir." Brusque, almost to the point of discourtesy, Wyant pulled forward a chair and found one for himself. "You wish my professional services?"

"No; only to pay for them," and I drew out my check book. "Would you mind letting me know the amount?"

"Tush, let it stand." The physician's manner grew a shade more cordial. "My secretary will send the bill."

"But I'll not be here."

"You are leaving?" Wyant's eyes gleamed under their bushy gray brows. "When? To-night?" The

questions were spoken casually, but I detected a different note in his high, querulous voice.

"Perhaps, but I haven't fully decided." I laid a signed check and my fountain pen on the end table at his elbow. "Therefore it seems best to square accounts. Will you fill in the amount due?"

With a show of reluctance Wyant complied with my request. My gaze drifted from him to the communicating door between his waiting room and consulting office; it stood ajar and a faint beam of light filtered through the opening.

"Your pen"—the doctor thrust it into my hand, his manner suggesting haste. "How are you feeling now, Burton?"

"It still aches at times." I touched my head gingerly. "The slightest pressure is painful—but nothing to compare to last night."

Wyant nodded understandingly. "You've had a close call"—he paused and displayed the check, that I might read the very modest sum he had written on the dotted lines, and then pocketed it. "Your feverish condition gave Miss de Peyster much concern; she very generously attributed your aggressive attitude toward her to the delusions of an ill man."

He may have meant the explanation kindly, but instead of promoting a sense of harmony I was conscious of a rising tide of irritation, impossible to suppress as I met the mockery of his smile.

"Possibly you will diagnose as hallucination my seeing you and Mrs. Grymes together at two o'clock this

morning." I spoke roughly, with the intention of drawing him out, but he calmed down as my temper rose.

"My dear Burton, what is a doctor's office for but to receive patients?" he asked mildly.

"What was the matter with the housekeeper?"

"That"—Wyant stood up—"is none of your affair."

I had thought that he wished to terminate our interview, but he headed for the communicating door. Before it closed under his sudden jerk, I saw a small and shapely hand move across the radius of light, groping, apparently, for a package of cigarettes on a smoking stand just inside his consulting office. Within that room some person had been a silent listener to our conversation. When Wyant turned again in my direction, I was standing by the entrance to his suite of offices.

"Must you be off?" I had instinctively disliked the physician when first we met in Studio House, a dislike intensified by his, to me, obvious attempt to further entangle Claire Fechet in Reade's murder when he had given his halting testimony at the inquest, and now, as we faced each other, I found no reason to modify my first opinion of him.

"Yes," I replied shortly.

"To your train?"

"No." I felt that I had scored, as I detected the swift change in his expression; then his feelings were again masked. "I am on my way to join Inspector Warfield."

"Give him this message for me"—Wyant laid his hand on the hall door—"tell Warfield that Sylvester is a fluent liar," and, laughing softly to himself, he bowed me out.

Inspector Warfield answered my ring of Reade's front doorbell with a promptness which suggested that he had not been far away. His raised finger enjoined silence, and somewhat mystified, I followed him into the room Claire Fechet had used for her secretarial work. Perched on one of the big chairs was Sylvester, while opposite to him reclined Headquarters Detective Wilson; whatever enjoyment the latter got out of the situation was not shared by the diminutive office boy, down whose ebony countenance perspiration trickled.

" 'Deed, Boss, it's de gospel truf," he whined. "Didn' nobuddy clime up de ladduh, 'cept me. . . ."

"And Dr. Wyant?"

"No, suh, he didn'." Sylvester's lips trembled so he could scarcely enunciate. "Doctuh Wyant didn' cum back to de department a-tall while Ah wuz dere yesterday mawnin'."

"And were you there from seven-thirty yesterday morning until you came here to tell us that Miss Fechet was in Dr. Wyant's office?" demanded Wilson. "Speak up; we want the truth, boy—no lies!"

The detective's threatening tones demoralized Sylvester completely.

"Y-y-y-yassuh," he stuttered; "I only went out wunct, jes' the teenies' minute—"

"Went out where?"

"T-t-t-to git my winnin's fum Frank, the night man, befo' he went off duty."

"Craps, eh?"

Sylvester pretended not to hear. "I wasn' a inch fum de do' of Doctuh Wyant's department," he insisted. "Nobuddy could a-got in or out onless I seen 'em."

"Was the ladder still up against the garden window?" demanded Warfield, and Sylvester bounced to his feet.

"N-n-no, suh; I done pulled it up into de room aftah me."

"Then how did the ladder happen to be outside the window when I was there with Miss Fechet?" I asked.

At a loss for an immediate reply, the boy shuffled his feet about in unhappy silence.

"Ah reckon I'se mistaken 'bout pullin' up dat ladder so early," he began after deep thought. "Miss Fechet made me kind-a fergitful." He looked up at Inspector Warfield and his manner became fawning. "May Ah lie down an' die, but I'se tole de truf—nobuddy but me used dat ladder."

Warfield and Wilson exchanged glances. "Skip along," directed the inspector, and Sylvester was off and away before the words were fairly out of his mouth, with the detective in his wake.

"I've just left Wyant." My announcement interested Warfield sufficiently to cause him to put down the telephone unused. "He said to tell you Sylvester is a fluent liar."

"It may be." Warfield stroked his hair back off his temples. "But, Mr. Burton, the doctor doesn't need his office boy to prove he didn't murder Alfred Reade; Wyant was at the bedside of a patient in Chevy Chase at the very hour that Reade was shot. His is a cast-iron alibi."

I made no effort to conceal my disappointment. "But Joe Reade lives with the doctor."

"But his alibi is unimpeachable." The inspector's unequivocal statement silenced objection. "After I left you yesterday at Studio House, I stopped in at the National Press Club and saw his signed breakfast check; the head waiter confirmed the hour—seven-thirty. It's not humanly possible for Joe to have been served breakfast, eaten it and reached here—all in fifteen minutes."

I nodded a silent agreement and turned away, not wishing my quick-witted companion to realize how much I had depended on securing some tangible evidence which would tend to clear Claire; now, both Dr. Wyant and Joe Reade were removed from the list of possible suspects. With uncanny intuition, Warfield read my thoughts.

"The field narrows," he commented softly, "with the elimination of those two and Andy Grymes and his wife. By the way, she's due here," he consulted his watch. "Knowing your interest in her, I wanted you present—there's the bell now."

But the heavy tread approaching a second later announced another than the light-footed housekeeper, and

we both turned expectantly to face the newcomer.

"Here you are, Warfield," and Sergeant Meade, finger-print expert of the Bureau of Identification, striding forward, handed a sheaf of white cards to the inspector. "These finger prints," he went on, after a curt nod to me, "found on the butt of the automatic pistol, are yours, Mr. Burton, and these," he indicated the next card, "were made by Miss Fechet—"

"Hold, have you a record of her finger prints?" I broke in quickly.

"Yes, took it yesterday." Meade moved my hat and overcoat to the desk and occupied the chair on which I had previously tossed them. "These finger prints are plenty good enough for identification, although a bit blurred in spots; but here," he touched a third card, "are the prints of an index finger and thumb found on the barrel of the pistol—clear, aren't they?" He paused to admire his handiwork. "Made by some one who picked it up between thumb and forefinger and carried it suspended in air—the weight of the weapon made the person cling tightly to it and the impression is perfect."

"Have you identified those finger prints?" I asked eagerly.

"Not yet, Mr. Burton."

Warfield looked across at me. "But when we do, you will know who stole your pistol last night in Studio House and placed it in the linen closet."

"And why," I added. "Sergeant, have you taken impressions of the other occupants of Studio House?"

He shook his head. "I'm on my way there now."

"And you might stop at Dr. Wyant's office—"

Warfield's impatient exclamation interrupted me. "Still worrying over Wyant?" he asked. "I fear you let your prejudices run away with your judgment."

"Wyant was one of the persons in my bedroom last night," I cut in sharply, nettled by his remark. "Be sure and go to his office, Meade."

"Do so." To my surprise, Warfield seconded my suggestion with heartening emphasis. Giving no explanation of his *volte-face,* he called, "Wait, Meade; have you given me finger prints of Joe Reade and the two Grymes?"

"You have them all," and wasting no more words in farewell, Meade hurried away. In deep thought I trailed along as the inspector went into the hall, having first pocketed the finger-print records. The same policeman I had seen stationed at the front door broke off his subdued conversation with some individual standing in the vestibule, and looked hopefully at his superior officer.

"Don't wait after eleven o'clock," the latter said. "Everything locked up?"

"Yes, Inspector, absolutely." The man hesitated. "Doyle, here, says he will be on call."

"True enough." Doyle left the shadow of the vestibule and under the hall light I recognized the sleepy patrolman whom Warfield had interviewed after the discovery of Reade's murder. "Just whistle and I'll come on the run; me beat's a quiet one."

"Except when a man is murdered on it." Doyle crimsoned and I noticed the vindictive gleam that flashed into his eyes behind his thick-lensed spectacles; evidently he did not take kindly to criticism, even when criticism was only implied. Possibly Warfield regretted his curtness, for he spoke more kindly.

"We have let the extra guard go." The inspector displayed his police whistle. "I'll blow this if necessary. Mr. Burton and I will remain here all night."

Astounded, I stared after Warfield as he disappeared into the room we had just left; he had made no mention of such a plan, although when I talked with him on the telephone he had hinted that we might be detained until a late hour. Pondering over the turn of events, I watched Doyle cross over to the grandfather clock by the circular staircase and compare his watch with that timepiece. The illumination was poor and noticing his squinting efforts to observe the hands on the old clock's face, I touched a wall button and flooded the room with light. Doyle mingled his thanks with a respectful "good night," which I failed to acknowledge, my attention being attracted by a framed coat of arms hanging farther along the wall in a niche. The coloring and the quarterings of the small painting were extremely well done, but it was the crest and the Latin motto which I examined with particular care; then, thrusting my hands in my pockets, I went in search of the inspector, guided by the aroma of an excellent cigar.

"Warfield." I paused in front of him, sitting at ease

in the dead man's living room. "Do you recall the ring which Miss Fechet picked up in the next room?"

"Perfectly—her father's signet ring and much too large for her finger." He blew some smoke rings my way. "Why?"

"Do you remember the crest?"

"Sure, because of its oddity—a harp with a woman's head and wings—and the motto, if I remember correctly, translated means 'Constant and True.'"

"Correct." I stifled a sigh. *Constanti et Vero*—such was the Latin motto under the coat of arms, occupying its inconspicuous niche in the Reade hall. It was singular that Claire's father should have owned a signet ring with the Reade crest and motto carved upon it. Considerably perturbed, I turned again to my silent companion. "Why should I stay here all night?"

The inspector smoked on for a minute. "I should have consulted you," he admitted; his grave bearing silenced further questions on my part. "You know the verdict of the coroner's inquest." Warfield removed his cigar that he might speak with more distinctness. "You *may* not know that Miss Fechet's case goes to the Grand Jury to-morrow."

I glanced at him, aghast. So that was why the judge and the District Attorney were lenient as to bail. Claire Fechet might enjoy her freedom a bare twenty-four hours and then—

"It's monstrous!" I thundered. "What chance has her lawyer for defense—"

"With the evidence against her, none." Leaning

back in the big wing chair, Warfield smiled with his lips only; his eyes were keenly watchful as he bent sideways and gazed past me. "Come in, Mr. Reade."

I looked around in time to see Joe Reade standing on the threshold of the communicating door; whether he had waited for an invitation to enter or whether he wished to hear what we said without making his presence known, I could not decide. Advancing with a certain nervousness discernible, he nodded to us both and took, uninvited, a chair close to his uncle's desk.

"They told me at Police Headquarters that you were here, Inspector," he began, as neither one of us addressed him. "So I came around."

"What for?" asked Warfield dryly.

Young Reade flushed; otherwise he betrayed no sign of resentment at the inspector's sharply put question.

"You've searched Uncle Alfred's papers?" he demanded.

"Yes; what then?"

"Have you found a—a—will?" His question came with a rush at the end, almost as if the words were forced from him by some inner emotion.

"No." The curt monosyllable was a distinct shock, judging from Joe's expression. Warfield, his interest quickening, spoke again as he edged his chair closer. "Have you any idea where your uncle kept private papers?"

Joe hesitated, his eyes darting this way and that about the room and, for a moment, forgetful of our presence, he scanned each piece of furniture. His black cloth

suit was blatantly new, also his black tie; obviously Joe had conformed to the conventions and was properly clothed in mourning, although his uncle had turned him out of house and home. I tried to eye him dispassionately—the man Claire had refused to marry. An athlete, undoubtedly, from his build and breadth of shoulder; good looking, with a straight eye and a crooked smile. Awakening to the fact that I had stared him almost out of countenance, I moved, even as Joe shifted his position and his outflung hand touched the desk.

"One of these drawers has a false bottom," he volunteered, "but I can't be sure which—"

"Why not?"

"Because Claire stepped in the way when Uncle Alfred pressed the spring—" Warfield stopped him with an imperious gesture.

"One moment, sir; what was the occasion for Mr. Reade opening this secret compartment in your presence?"

"A proper one." Joe flushed angrily. "Uncle Alfred needed money to pay for a radio just installed in his bedroom."

"And he kept his cash in this secret compartment?"

"Obviously; he went to his desk to get the money. I heard a click and came over in time to see a large roll of bills in his hand. Let me go through the desk."

"Wait." Warfield's tone brooked no disobedience and, crestfallen, Joe dropped back in his chair. Lifting the cradle phone from its stand, the inspector got his connection almost immediately.

"Miss Fechet?" he called—my start was duplicated by Joe—"Inspector Warfield speaking. Your presence is necessary at the Reade mansion; please come at once. Oh, never mind the lateness of the hour; bring Miss de Peyster with you if you fear coming alone through the streets."

Replacing the phone, Warfield sat back and regarded us. "Why try guesswork in locating the drawer, when Miss Fechet can tell us with accuracy which one has the false bottom," he explained. "And why so—so fidgety, Mr. Reade?"

Unable longer to remain stationary, Joe sprang up and crossed over to where I stood.

"All Washington is aflame over the action of the coroner's jury," he declared, and his voice was far from steady. "I—I—suppose the verdict was to be expected. Claire had my gun and I warned Uncle Alfred to leave her alone."

Unable to believe my ears, I glared at Joe. Had he so little understanding of Claire, so little faith in the woman he had professed to love, as to be among the first to condemn her! Our silence evidently disturbed him, and he shifted his uneasy gaze from Warfield to me.

"Of course any fool knows Claire is innocent," he added, with forced vehemence.

"But can any fool prove it?" I turned on him, my contempt finding voice at last. "Can you?"

"By———! If I could, would I be wasting time here. . . ."

"Looking for your uncle's will!" My jeer was meant to infuriate.

Joe's fist missed its mark but my uppercut lifted him clear off his feet onto the divan.

"There's no occasion for violence." Warfield stepped between us. "We'll know in short order whether Reade left a will in this desk; here comes Miss Fechet."

CHAPTER XIX

Silhouettes

I TOPPED Inspector Warfield by an inch and it was over his head that I saw Claire standing in the doorway. I doubt if she even glanced our way; she had eyes only for Joe Reade, as the latter scrambled to his feet.

"Joe!" Her muffled exclamation expressed little, but her eyes, wide with surprise, held also a touch of scorn.

Joe halted in some uncertainty and his hand, nursing his bruised jaw, went instinctively to his forehead and wiped off the tiny beads of sweat which had formed there.

"I've a right to be here." His manner was almost a challenge. "Sis and I are uncle's nearest of kin"—he turned, openly defiant, toward Christine, advancing with Claire. "Uncle Alfred died unmarried."

Claire's hand sought her companion. The two friends were an unconscious foil for each other as they faced Joe, arm in arm. Dressed in some black material, their somber garb enhanced Christine's dark and vivid beauty and Claire's more spiritual loveliness.

"Why waste time?" Inspector Warfield came from out the shadows. "I hear that you, Miss Fechet, are familiar with the secret compartment in Mr. Reade's desk; that is, his nephew has so informed us."

Claire hesitated. "I opened it once," she admitted; "perhaps I may be able to find the combination again," and loosening Christine's tender clasp, she came down the room.

Perhaps my gaze attracted hers; perhaps it was the proximity of the chair in which we had found the dead man, that caused Claire to look our way—a look hastily averted—and with an unmistakable shudder she hurried to the desk just as Inspector Warfield reached there, keys dangling in his hand.

"Which drawer shall I unlock?" he asked.

"This"—Claire touched the top one on her right as I joined them. It took a second or two to locate the right key, for Reade's mahogany desk was evidently constructed to order and no central locking system controlled the drawers.

Warfield cleared out the odds and ends in the drawer, pencils, pens and rubber bands; whatever else it had contained I presumed the District Attorney had under lock and key. Without comment, Claire picked up two pencils and tapped them back and forth across the bottom of the drawer, commencing at opposite ends and hitting the wood simultaneously with each pencil. Suddenly, after passing across the drawer the two pencils struck the hidden springs and the wooden bottom tipped upwards.

Warfield caught Claire's extended fingers and with his other hand lifted the lid of the false bottom—beneath was a steel-lined compartment. However, it was not the glint of light on metal that engrossed our at-

tention, but a fat roll of U. S. Treasury notes and a long envelope. The inspector pocketed the money and lifted the flap of the unsealed envelope.

"Don't crowd!" he exclaimed ironically; none of us had moved and our excited breathing was plainly audible. "Here's Reade's last will and testament, signed, sealed—but not delivered"— He moved the document out of Joe's reach—"Not to you, sir, to-night."

"What does it say?" The question came from Christine, the first words she had uttered since entering the living room.

I doubt if Warfield had ever had a more attentive audience; with no sense of hurry, he leaned back in the dead man's chair and unfolded the will. It was but a page in length, the kind of paper procurable at any stationery store in the country. Following the legal phraseology of the printed words at the top, Reade, in simple language, after a few bequests, left all that he died possessed of to his beloved nephew, Joseph Reade.

A conflict of emotions passed over Joe's agitated countenance and for a brief moment he was speechless.

"The will is dated"—Warfield brought the document closer to the light—"two months ago." He looked up at Joe. "And a week back you and your uncle quarreled."

The young man cleared his throat noisily. "There was no hard feeling on my part."

"Indeed?" The inspector raised his eyebrows questioningly. "And you knew the nature of this will—that your uncle had left his millions to you?"

"Well, eh—" Embarrassed by the point-blank question, Joe clasped and unclasped his hands in aimless fashion. "Uncle Alfred joked about my being his heir, but I—I—didn't take his remarks seriously—"

"Except sufficiently to ask me to look for this will!" broke in the inspector.

Resentment flamed in Joe's sullen glance. "What of it?" he demanded hotly, and shrugged in scorn. "If Uncle Alfred had died without making a will, I'd still inherit his property."

"Would you, though; would you?" The question was put even as Mrs. Andy Grymes elbowed Claire rudely to one side in her eagerness to confront Joe, but as the housekeeper encountered his unfriendly look, her ardor cooled perceptibly, changing the words upon her lips. "Inspector Warfield, ask her what Alfred Reade planned—in his new will," and her accusing finger indicated Christine de Peyster.

The latter changed color—except for that her self-control was admirable. "So you are not above listening at the keyhole, Mrs. Andy?" Christine smiled as the barb went home, crimsoning the housekeeper's pallid cheeks. "I was waiting in the outer room for Miss Fechet last Tuesday and Mr. Reade informed me he had just seen his lawyer, Tom Kendall, and instructed him to draw up a new will," for the first time her softly modulated voice faltered, "disinheriting Joe."

"Ah!" Warfield rubbed his chin reflectively, as the rest of us remained silent. "And in whose favor was this new will drawn?"

"Mr. Reade did not say"—Christine's clear gaze never strayed from the inspector; nor did Joe, slumped down on a corner of the desk, look up from his scowling contemplation of the oriental rug. He seemed unaware of my proximity, and I edged closer that I might more clearly study his left hand, spread out on the desk under the direct light from the lamp. His hand was as brown as a berry, all save his third finger where the skin, between his knuckle and the first joint, was smooth and white.

It was Mrs. Andy who broke the silence. "Go on and tell us the rest," she urged, her excitement mounting; "how Lawyer Kendall was leaving town and the will wouldn't be ready for signature until to-morrow." She stopped, startled by Warfield rising abruptly.

"Is this woman's statement true, Miss de Peyster?" he asked.

Christine nodded. "Yes." It was only a monosyllable but it held a world of regret. Warfield, too, caught her curious inflection and it puzzled him, judging from his sidelong glance.

"As the other will was never signed, this holds," he announced, and picked up the legal document. Not until it was safely stowed away in an inside pocket did he speak again. "Mr. Reade." At the harsh pronouncement of his name, Joe rose up. "Were you aware that your uncle planned a new will?"

"If I deny it, what then?" Joe swaggered forward, his hands deeply buried in his trousers pockets; thrusting his face close to Warfield he broke into wild and

unrestrained laughter. "Well, I'll not lie, old cock; I knew I was to be disinherited—but, at that, I didn't kill Uncle Alfred."

Warfield brushed aside his declaration with an impatient grunt. "Who told you of the will?" he asked, and I, for one, was surprised by his courteous, not to say deferential, manner.

Joe considered his question under puckered eyebrows, then turning, he smiled at Christine. "Why did you write me not to mention that you had tipped me off about the new will?" he demanded, and his tone was compounded of mockery and mischief.

"A friendly warning." Her silvery voice was unflurried, but the sparkle in her eyes indicated that far different feelings than those she expressed, animated Christine. "You are headstrong, unreasoning—"

"Not unreasoning, Christine—I can put two and two together and make it—murder!" Joe grinned at us maliciously, but his evident desire to annoy Christine failed, judging from her calm acceptance of his gibe. Muttering something under his breath, he spun on his heel, only to find me standing in his way.

"Why, hello! Still here?" He regarded me insolently. "What's the particular attraction, Mr. Burton?"

"You."

"I'm flattered!" Joe saluted me with a wave of the hand.

"Hold it"—surprised, his left hand remained extended almost under my nose. Swiftly I determined on

a shot in the dark. "What's become of your signet ring?"

A gasp came from my right, where stood Claire and Christine, but I dared not look in their direction as I waited for his belated answer. That my question perturbed him was plain and it looked as though it would be ignored.

"You wax personal, Mr. Burton," he blurted out, and doubling his fist stared down at his third finger—"It looks bare naked, that's a fact." He skillfully evaded Claire's glance and both voice and manner were a shade more cordial. "Well, if you must pry into my affairs, I'll admit the ring's in hock."

"I hope with responsible parties."

Joe stared at me queerly. "What do you know about my ring?" he demanded.

I shrugged. "Only that it's a fine specimen and old, perhaps."

My remark struck a responsive chord. "Grandfather Reade had the signet rings made in duplicate for his two sons; Dad gave me his on my twenty-first birthday."

"The ring bears the Reade crest and motto—"

"Sure; a harp with the motto, *Constanti et Vero.*" Joe stopped. "Come, what do you know about this ring?"

"I noticed your finger—obviously you've worn a heavy ring for a long time. Just now I saw the Reade coat of arms hanging in the hall; so, like you, Mr.

Reade, I put two and two together." I bent closer. "May I see the pawn ticket?"

"You go to —" He edged off, livid; then, before any of us guessed his intention, he bolted from the room.

I stared after Warfield's vanishing figure as he, too, hurriedly left us.

"Don't go!" The request came from Christine de Peyster and obediently I turned back; but when I reached her side she maintained the same air of aloofness which had characterized her at our last meeting; nor did I find Claire in a chatting mood, while Mrs. Andy, still standing by the desk, had again lapsed into silence.

Under pretense of lighting the logs in the fireplace, for the April night had grown chilly, I studied the three women who had played so intimate a part in Alfred Reade's life—lovely Christine de Peyster, talented far beyond the ordinary, the woman he planned to marry; Claire Fechet, his secretary, possessing the most dangerous gift the Fates can bestow upon woman—fascination; and Mrs. Andy Grymes, his housekeeper, well-groomed and self-contained. Her glance was bent upon Claire as the latter paused by Christine and laid her hand with a gesture half timid, wholly tender, on the latter's shoulder. Unaware that I observed her, the mask of stern repression lifted and I glimpsed an inferno of passion beneath the housekeeper's composed exterior.

"How's your stamp collection coming along, Miss

Fechet?" The apparently irrelevant question sounded oddly in the tense atmosphere prevailing and I laid down the fire irons and went closer to Mrs. Andy as she spoke again, her smooth tones holding naught but casual interest. "Did you find the old, unused three-cent stamped envelope I gave you of any value?"

That her words were a distinct shock, I gathered from the strained attitude of the two women facing the housekeeper, then Claire, with undaunted courage, accepted the gauge of battle.

"The envelope was of no particular money value, Mrs. Andy," she replied, and her clear voice carried to Inspector Warfield just entering the room. "But it was a very pleasant help in time of need—"

"In mailing the marriage license back to Reade?" questioned Warfield.

"Quite true." Claire's fingers were not quite steady as she reached for a cigarette. "Congratulations on your perspicacity, Inspector."

Warfield reddened, stung by her condescending tone. "Is it wise to antagonize me, Miss Fechet?" he countered, bottling his wrath with difficulty.

"You misconstrue my meaning," sweetly. I stared at Claire in wonderment; gone was her shy diffidence, her appealing directness. A dark flush had mounted to her temples and her eyes burned with an emotion I could not fathom. "I spoke in a complimentary sense."

The inspector disregarded her peace overtures. "How came that license in your hands?" he demanded, with forbidding emphasis.

"Mr. Reade carelessly dropped the license under the magnolias." Her statement brought Christine to her feet with a low, terrified cry. "An ill wind from the garden blew it into my lap."

"You—Claire—good God!" Her face was pale as death. "Stop, say nothing more." Her warning was totally unheeded, for Warfield, regarding Claire as a cat watches a mouse, gave the young girl no opportunity to consider her line of action.

"Why did you stamp 'cancelled' on the license? Denial is useless"—he strove to hold her with his hypnotic gaze. "I know that you had that rubber stamp in your possession—why did you use it on the document?"

Behind a cloud of tobacco smoke Claire drew breath, but only for an instant. "A madcap notion that I could, by infuriating Mr. Reade, break off his engagement—"

"Ha! And that failing, you resorted to the eloquence of an army automatic"—Warfield's bitter sneer brought me in hot haste across the room. "Don't interfere, Mr. Burton; stand aside, sir!"

But I was not to be denied and my voice, more powerful than his, broke the spell of reckless disregard of consequence which had possessed Claire.

"First thing on Monday morning you left that rubber stamp at the Variety Stationery Shop"—she nodded as I paused for some sign of confirmation. "How did you get to his shop?"

"By trolley car—"

"And did you return to Studio House by the same method of conveyance?" I hung on her answer, scarcely breathing.

"Yes." And I stood aghast—silenced; my attempted alibi was of no more practical value than a house of cards. But Warfield heard her admission with a smile of triumph.

"That's the last link in the evidence," he declared, and his voice was dangerously soft. "Fifteen minutes is all the time required to make the trip by trolley from Studio House to Stuntz' store, even in the rush hour. No, Miss Fechet," as she started to speak, "any disclaimer is useless, for we tested the trip out this afternoon, by walking, by motor and by trolley."

Slowly, automatically, Claire transferred her gaze to me, and in her tragic eyes, faith in my integrity gave place to horrified realization that I had made use of her confidence.

"You left Studio House at seven o'clock, according to Norah's sworn testimony," went on Warfield relentlessly; "Stuntz declares you were in his shop at seven-fifteen, and 'vent avay in a hurry,' " he mimicked the German to the life. "Allowing five minutes for car waits and the short walk here, you reached this house at twenty minutes of eight—and in the following five minutes you shot and killed Alfred Reade."

Incapable of speech, Claire stared ahead in stupefied silence as Warfield's bitter arraignment echoed in our ears.

"You go too fast, Warfield." I took a page from

the inspector's methods and spoke low, choosing my words with care. "On leaving the trolley at the corner and hurrying down this block, Miss Fechet would then have come face to face with the postman, Charlie Todd, making his rounds up the street and coming toward her."

"She slipped by when he was delivering mail in some doorway, with his back to the street," protested Warfield hotly.

"But, remember, Policeman Doyle was with Todd, and *he* did not go to people's doors, but stood on the sidewalk," I paused, smiling sardonically at the bewilderment written large on the inspector's countenance. "And Doyle swore he did not see Miss Fechet on Monday morning."

"Bravo!" Christine clapped her hands, her eyes sparkling as with fever. "Come, Claire; you have endured enough." She faced Warfield and her lips parted in a derisive smile. "The next time, Inspector, you will not inveigle us into coming here without council. Good night." She dropped us a curtsey and in sheer mockery blew a kiss to Mrs. Andy, glowering in her corner, and, pulling Claire along, made for the outer room.

At the front door I caught up with them, or rather with Claire, who hesitated inside the vestibule at my hail.

"Let me go with you." I found the doorway partly occupied by Norah's bulk, as I drew up behind Claire.

"Indade, but I'm here to see thim home," she pro-

tested. "'Tis no hour for loidies to be walkin' the sthreets; come along, Miss Claire—"

But Claire wished otherwise. "I'll join you, Norah; go ahead"—and a distinct stamp on the tiled floor of the vestibule accompanied the order. With manifest reluctance the Irishwoman followed Christine to the bottom of the steps and once there, both of them turned and looked back at us.

"Mr. Burton"—her icy fingers touched mine—"I must confess; I cannot let you believe—" Claire's stammered whisper was meant for my ear alone and I bent closer so as not to miss anything she said. "I told an untruth—"

"When?" I barely breathed the question, my eyes devouring the beauty of her upturned face.

"When I said I found Mr. Reade's house key on the hall table in Studio House"—all hesitancy gone, the words tumbled from her trembling lips—"I had it with me all the time, in my bag—forgotten." My silence troubled her. "You haven't mentioned to any one what I said about going back for the key?"

"I have not"—my vehemence convinced her, or else it was my steady gaze which did not flicker before her own.

"Thank God!" A sob choked her utterance. "Yes, I'm coming, Christine;" Claire glanced at me, her eyes like twin stars. "Tell no one." Her whisper floated back to me and I stood staring up the street after the three women like some ninny fresh from the country.

Closing the front door a few minutes later, I looked

about for the customary police guard even as Warfield's verbal permission for him to leave at eleven o'clock recurred to me. The silvery chimes of the grandfather clock gave notice that it was midnight as I passed it on my way down the narrow back hall in search of a drink. It took me some minutes to locate the kitchen light and that in the pantry. In the latter place I found a bottle of White Rock in the electric refrigerator and unceremoniously helped myself, first pouring some cognac from my flask into the glass. The stimulant was refreshing, and pausing only long enough to mix a high ball for Warfield, I put out the lights and retraced my steps along the dark hallway to the front of the house.

I was about to step out into the front hall when Mrs. Andy and Inspector Warfield came out from the secretary's office.

"And can you tell me why Mr. Burton laid such stress on Mr. Joe's ring?" she asked. "I've seldom seen him so put out." The inspector, standing somewhat to one side, did not observe her baleful look; in fact, he seemed not fully to comprehend her question, for the telephone was sending its noisy clamor through the silent rooms.

"Miss Fechet picked up her father's ring here yesterday—by gracious—wait—"

But, apparently, waiting formed no part of Mrs. Andy's scheme, for, as Warfield went to answer the phone in the living room, she crossed the hall and opened the front door; instead, however, of going into the vestibule, she swung the door shut with a resound-

ing bang. She listened, then, reassured by Warfield's loud conversation at the telephone, she recrossed the hall and, with a speed and stealth which took my breath away, as I ducked out of sight, sped up the circular staircase.

For an instant I wavered in doubt, then I raced after her, leaving Warfield's high ball on the first step of the stairs. Reaching the second floor, I paused in doubt, but the faintest echo of a footfall above me sent me scurrying to the third story. Again I paused in uncertainty. Had Mrs. Andy gone direct to the suite of rooms she and her husband occupied? I partly turned in that direction, even as a light flared up in the bedroom to my left. Careful to make no sound, I crept forward into Alfred Reade's dressing room and from there stared ahead.

Tall candles stood at the head and foot of the undertaker's couch upon which lay all that was mortal of Alfred Reade. In their flickering light the white-sheeted figure was silhouetted on the blank walls of the bedroom; it also showed Mrs. Andy Grymes bending over the dead man—her figure took on a grotesque shape as she lifted the sheet. For what seemed a long, long time to me, crouching against the door-jamb, I stared at the silhouettes of the living and the dead—and, as I looked at the shadowy outlines of foreheads and features, they took on a semblance to each other. I rubbed my eyes in sheer bewilderment and opened them again in time to see the housekeeper's lips rest on Reade's immovable countenance.

A soft patter-patter came faintly to me, and I grew conscious of another's approach; so, apparently, did Mrs. Andy, for, on the opposite wall her form assumed the rigidity of the dead; suddenly, soundlessly, she dropped to her knees and was concealed from view by the bedding draped over the couch.

Had Warfield, going in search of Mrs. Andy, found my high ball glass and come to look me up? The question had barely formulated in my excited brain when I caught sight of something moving on hands and knees from the farther door over to the undertaker's couch. Concealed from each other's view, neither Mrs. Andy nor the newcomer guessed the other's presence. Again I watched the opposite wall and was in time to see two hands steal upward under the sheet—two living hands that met and locked across the dead man's chest. A prolonged and horrible scream cut the silence and rising upward simultaneously from concealment, Andy Grymes and his wife confronted each other.

CHAPTER XX

A Strange Disappearance

THE first to recover her wits, Mrs. Andy jerked herself loose from his palsied grasp.

"Ann!" His face convulsed by passion, Andy circled the undertaker's couch, but she was too quick and evaded his clutching fingers by a dexterous twist. Lashed into fury by his failure, her husband clapped his hand in his pocket and fired from his hip; the bullet shattered Reade's shaving glass, even as I jammed Andy against the wall and jerked the pistol from him.

"Caught with the goods." Warfield, breathless from his run up two flights of stairs, stopped long enough to switch on the electric lights. "Let's see the gun!"

"A Colt revolver!" Andy took the words from my lips. "I didn't croak Alfred Reade; but, by God! I wanted to!" He whirled on his wife, and abject misery as well as passion stared from his protruding eyes. "You couldn't stay away from him living, and now he's dead you—you—you've got to be by him—loving him —the dirty dog!"

"Oh, be still!" Goaded beyond control, Mrs. Andy turned upon her husband. "Your insane jealousy will ruin us." She raised her hands in a wild, despairing gesture. "Will you ever understand. . . ."

"How close was your relationship with Reade?" I asked gently; she gazed at me uncomprehendingly for a bare second. "Your kinship, I should say."

"He was my half-brother." So totally unexpected was her answer that Andy grew limp in my grasp.

"Ann!" His voice rose almost into a scream. "Ann!"

But the repression of years was broken and Ann broke into a flood of tears. "Alfred made me swear never to admit our relationship," she gasped, as soon as she could speak coherently. "He hated my mother. Father died soon after my birth. Mother remained on our plantation in Louisiana until her death. We were terribly poor and could not afford a lawyer and —and—" She stopped as emotion threatened to master her. "There's no need of going into all the dreary years . . . in San Francisco I met and married Andy."

Warfield regarded husband and wife in speculative silence. "Surely, Grymes, you knew your wife's maiden name was Reade—"

Mrs. Andy extended a trembling hand. "No, I was a widow then and Andy never asked questions. Later, when we were beggared by illness and our situation desperate I appealed to Alfred—my half-brother. He agreed to aid me, provided I would come as his housekeeper, and"—the bitterness of a lifetime of hardship, humiliation and unhappiness, unnerved her—"he exacted his pound of flesh."

"You have papers, documents to prove your birth and relationship to Reade?" demanded Warfield.

"Yes." The housekeeper paused to clear her voice.

"Here?" and he motioned toward the suite of rooms she and Andy had occupied. She checked him instantly.

"No, not here. I gave the documents for safe-keeping to Dr. Wyant—"

A light broke upon me. "You went to his office this morning—around two?"

She glanced at me, startled. "Yes; I feared to have the papers on my person"—a swift sidelong look at Grymes betrayed her meaning; then she stared at me again. "Dr. Wyant can be trusted."

"But what brought you upstairs to-night so secretly?" I demanded. "Warfield would have permitted you to see your brother—"

"I was not sure; you have kept us from the house." She stammered slightly, hesitated, then burst forth eagerly into speech. "Your talk of the family rings, Mr. Burton, made me curious to see if Alfred's was still upon his finger—and that was why I felt under the covers, fearing discovery if I remained standing, when I imagined you and not Andy had followed me upstairs —see, the ring is gone." And she pulled back the sheet, exposing the crossed hands of the dead man—both were bare of rings.

Warfield whipped out his magnifying glass and bent over the couch; when he straightened up, he nodded across at me.

"He's worn a ring—"

"But I saw it upon Miss de Peyster's finger on Sunday morning." It was Grymes who spoke. "I am not

mistaken, sir; the ring's unusual and it was on her hand when she came to the garage to get her car; she rented half of Mr. Reade's garage."

Warfield and I exchanged glances, then he shifted his attention to Grymes. "And what brought you here, Grymes—housebreaking?"

The question affected Mrs. Andy more than it did her husband; the color fled from her cheeks and she put out her hand to brace herself against the big four-post bed.

"I wasn't housebreaking," protested Grymes vehemently. "Miss Fechet returned our house key and I used it—"

"For what purpose?" smoothly.

"Well, eh, I—I wanted to see if the ring had been given back to Mr. Reade before his murder." Grymes's easy assurance gave plausibility to his explanation, but had he taken his cue from his wife's statement?

Warfield listened with polite attention; then suddenly his manner changed. "I might believe you, Grymes, if we hadn't found your cache of narcotics, you devil—"

"It wasn't mine—'fore God, it wasn't!" Grymes was on his knees, his aspect abject. "'Twas Mr. Reade's—"

"Get up!" Warfield's well-planted kick lifted Grymes to his feet. "And get out!" He turned and sympathy for the wretched woman by his side softened his manner. "Come with us, Mrs. Andy."

But she shook her head, and her eyes, brimming with tears, followed her husband. "I've cast my lot with

him," she spoke with the fire and passion of youth. "Andy's all I have—"

"How about your child in New Orleans?"

The question brought Andy back to his wife, his eyes half starting from his head. "What's that? I thought the child died?"

"No, I lied." She leaned back half spent, eyes closed —then roused. "Before I married Andy, I left her at the Ursuline Convent in New Orleans with the kindly nuns—" She faced Warfield. "How did you learn of Annette?"

"Through your monthly remittances to the convent—"

An oath escaped Andy, and this time it was expressive of relief, almost happiness. "I've been blind, blind!" he groaned, eyes and tone grew beseeching, as he extended his arms to his wife. "My jealous rages pictured every horror—"

"Hush!" Her hand slipped into his. "We will go together, Inspector; where are your men?"

Ten minutes later Warfield and I were back in the living room.

"The bait worked," he said. "When I found Andy had secured the house key from Miss Fechet, I took off the guard to give him the oportunity to steal in unobserved, as he thought."

I chose a chair—distant, however, from the one in which I had found Reade's body, and lit a cigarette.

"Was Andy's charge true as to Reade's secreting drugs?" Warfield's shrug stopped me.

"Andy is in the hands of the Narcotic Squad now; if he can prove that the opium cleverly hidden in Reade's pantry was not put there by him—"

"Warfield"—in my turn, I interrupted him—"have you forgotten Wah Ling, Reade's Chinese cook?"

The inspector groaned. "Dash it, no." He paced the floor rapidly, talking low, his glance darting hither and yon. "The New York police are trailing Wah Ling." He stopped and glared at me, and I noticed that the harassed lines had deepened under his eyes. "Mr. Burton, the Grymes's alibi is unimpeachable, but —but—by Jove—Mrs. Andy had every incentive to kill Reade—a man so despicable as to employ his own sister as a menial in his home, for, from what I've learned, she was really an upper servant."

I nodded in agreement. "See if there's a light burning in Wyant's office." Warfield crossed over and flung wide the garden door. "If the doctor's up and about, phone him to come over." I waited expectantly; then the garden door closed with a snap and the inspector made for the telephone. When he put the instrument down he was whistling. Going over to Reade's desk, he lifted the drawer and looked inside the false bottom, using his magnifying glass; finally satisfied, he put back the lid and closed and locked the drawer.

"A nice piece of cabinet making," he commented. "With money secreted about the premises, and drugs, I scarcely wonder that Reade kept his house under lock and key."

I shrugged. "Or conscience turned him into a coward; there's the bell." Listening attentively I heard Warfield greet Wyant, then, before I could select another cigarette, they were in the room with me.

"You keep late hours, Burton." Wyant's sardonic smile annoyed me inexpressibly. "Is it wise, considering your head injury?"

For reply I offered him a cigarette. "Thanks, but I have my own," and the doctor took out a box of Dimitrinos. "Now, Inspector, what was it you could not ask me over the phone?"

Warfield stationed himself before the hearth and looked down at the physician; then he waved in my direction. "Go ahead, Mr. Burton."

I needed no second bidding. "Mrs. Andy has just admitted her relationship to Reade and stated that she left her proof with you."

Wyant looked inquiringly at Warfield and back at me. "Quite true; what then?"

"Have you the papers?"

He shook his head. "I placed them in my safe deposit box this morning."

"Without glancing through them?"

"No." Wyant fingered his cigarette box, evidently in doubt how to proceed. "Mrs. Andy's birth certificate and the elder Reade's letters prove her parentage."

"Then why did not Mrs. Andy's mother get her widow's share of the Reade estate when her husband died?" I demanded.

"She was his common-law wife." Wyant let his

cigarette die out as he bent closer. "I am not familiar with Louisiana state laws, but I can understand why young Joe never was told of the situation."

"Then he has no inkling that Mrs. Andy is really his aunt?"

"No." Wyant tossed his unsmoked cigarette into the fireplace and rose. "Joe believed he and his sister were the only heirs to his uncle's millions." His smile was enigmatic. "From Joe's enjoyment of night club life, I calculate he'll welcome a windfall."

"Hard up, eh?" Wyant nodded. "Been pawning his belongings? Clothes?" Again the surgeon nodded; this time more emphatically. "Jewelry—I mean stick pins, rings?"

"I can't say about that." Wyant's eyes strayed around the large room inquiringly. "Joe sold his signet ring to me, with the proviso that he could buy it back at any time."

"Oh!" Warfield drawled out the exclamation, then spoke more briskly. "I'll walk over to your office, Doctor; frankly, I'd like to take a look at that ring."

Wyant stopped on the threshold of the secretary's office. "Sorry; you'd have your walk for nothing—the ring's missing."

CHAPTER XXI

Trapped

GENUINELY taken aback, the inspector stared at the speaker.

"When did you notice your loss?" he asked.

"Yesterday; I carelessly left the ring on my dresser" —his gesture was expressive.

"Perhaps Joe 'borrowed' it back." My suggestion, however, proved unwelcome, judging from the stern compression of Wyant's lips.

"The boy's a fool, but he's honest, Burton." The surgeon bowed to me with punctilious courtesy and accompanied Warfield to the front door.

I had smoked my last cigarette when the inspector rejoined me in the living room.

"It's a fine kettle of fish," the latter admitted, sitting down by me as he took from his pocket the document we had found in Reade's secret hiding place. Slowly he unfolded the will. "Claire Fechet knew of this—see, she witnessed it."

Rising, I looked down over his shoulder. Claire Fechet—her name was written boldly, albeit somewhat indistinctly.

"A satisfactory will from Joe's viewpoint," went on Warfield, replacing it in his pocket, "but worthless."

"What? Have you found another?" I gasped.

"No; but by the laws of the District of Columbia a will has to be witnessed by two persons; otherwise it is invalid. I'm glad." Warfield took from his pocket the roll of money and removed the elastic from around it. "Now Mrs. Andy can claim her share as nearest of kin. Hello, what's that!" A small sheet of notepaper fell from among the bank notes and fluttered to the floor at my feet.

I reached for it. "A letter—an intimate letter," I exclaimed, scanning the clearly written lines, and I held it so that Warfield could read it with me. Neither of us spoke until we had turned the last page.

"The old story of man's inhumanity to woman," exclaimed Warfield, and he was more moved than I had ever seen him. "But men are the same the world over, when a woman's heart lies at their feet."

I scarcely heard him as I reread the letter; its pitiful wording told of the shame, the degradation of the writer and begged Alfred Reade to right the wrong that he had done her.

"She's a mere child, Warfield," I cried, in mounting wrath. "The blackguard! Look at the handwriting—clear but unformed, and the signature—Becky."

"Becky—who?" Warfield turned the letter over. "No surname—no address, of course!" in bitter disgust. "But there's a date—bring that lamp closer—thanks. By heaven!" he looked up at me. "The letter was written only last Friday—Reade must have gotten it on Saturday. Egad, I wonder if Becky knows

that he's dead and his body lying upstairs waiting to be buried to-morrow!"

"If so, she's the only one in the United States that doesn't!" I pointed to the stack of daily newspapers Warfield had placed on a corner table. "His death won't help her, poor girl."

"No, but—" Warfield's eyes darted about the room. "Reade evidently believed every human soul had a price—and he held the purse strings. It beats me how so fine a woman as Miss de Peyster would tolerate him around, much less contemplate marrying him. His wealth, I suppose." Warfield's sudden vehemence surprised me.

"What do you think of this?" and I pulled out the painted picture of Christine and in as few words as possible described finding it in the back of the daguerreotype which still faced us on the desk.

"If Reade considered Miss de Peyster a beautiful white devil, why did he wish to marry her?" I asked, pointing to the inscription.

"She intrigued him, fascinated him and undoubtedly tormented him." Warfield smiled—a smile of satisfaction. "Let's be thankful if any one made Reade suffer a bit before he died." The inspector stretched back in his chair. "How about making ourselves comfortable for the night; not a very cheerful place here." He smiled across at me. "Suppose we try the card room on the next floor."

I helped Warfield make sure that the windows and doors were securely fastened and together we walked

toward the hall. In passing Claire Fechet's desk, I spied my overcoat and stopped long enough to take the book I had brought with me.

The card room proved a relief from the sinister atmosphere of the place we had just left and I acceded with alacrity to Warfield's suggestion that we play Russian bank, fortified by a pot of black coffee which he prepared at Reade's well-supplied buffet. Warfield tired first and, after settling our scores, stretched himself out on the couch by the window. More wakeful, I selected an easy chair and opened my book. Its printed pages, however, could not banish thoughts of Claire. For what seemed a very long time, I sat idle, a prey to agonizing reflections. Claire admitted possession of the marriage license, admitted defacing it with the cancellation stamp, admitted mailing it to Reade with the hope of stopping the marriage—was it because she was an unsuccessful rival? I rubbed my aching head and thereby dislodged the book balanced on my knee. I picked it up mechanically. Claire admitted returning from Stuntz's store in time to get to this house before Reade was killed and she had the only key available—that is, at first she declared she had left it behind—in Studio House, and now she claimed it had never left her possession! Which statement could I believe?

In despair I turned the book over just as I had picked it up from the floor—the flyleaf faced me. It was not the expanse of blank paper, but the name "Becky" that startled me into wakefulness. Eagerly

I read the two lines: "To my kindest critic, Mrs. Martin, from Becky."

It took a second or two to arouse Inspector Warfield; together we read the inscription on the flyleaf and compared it with the letter to Reade from his unknown correspondent—the handwriting was identical.

"Where's your sister?"

"On the high seas en route to Europe." Not waiting for further comment, I ran down to the telephone on the first floor. It took fully three-quarters of an hour of extensive conversation to get my radio message "Who is Becky? Wireless her surname," on the air, and when that was done, I found Warfield had again made himself comfortable on the couch in the card room. For an hour or more I tried to follow his example, finally dropping off into cat naps. At a little before six in the morning, I gave up the futile attempt to sleep soundly and putting on my coat and hat, went downstairs and out into the vestibule.

The fresh April breeze was invigorating and, risking the chance that Warfield might not hear my ring when I returned, I stepped back and closed the front door. Before leaving the card room I had helped myself liberally to Reade's cigarettes, lacking more of my own, but the wind was sufficiently strong to extinguish my first two matches, and I reëntered the vestibule, and within its protection lit my cigarette. The half-burnt match dropped to the floor and as I put my foot on it, I noticed that the gray and brown tile used for the flooring lined the walls of the vestibule also.

The streets were deserted at that hour and, with nothing to distract me from the problem Warfield and I were trying to solve, I walked slowly around the block and approached Studio House. There were no signs of life in the quaint stone cottage, although opened windows showed that its occupants craved fresh air, in spite of the nearness of the first floor to the ground, making housebreaking an easy matter for an active person. A thought struck me and I hesitated; then casting discretion to the winds, I crossed the grass and went up to the Dutch door. By it was an open window, protected from intruders by the iron grill, the bars, however, set far enough apart to allow an arm to be squeezed through them. And beneath the window stood the hall table with a brass card tray; a key placed there and forgotten would easily be within reach of a slender, long-armed person!

Backing away from Studio House I hurried up the street in time to miss Patrolman Doyle as that worthy walked his beat. I noticed a faint hesitancy on his part as he came to the blind alley and saw him pause, glancing about, and then dart up it with accelerated speed. Somewhat puzzled by the policeman's antics, I kept on my way but instead of going at once to the Reade mansion, I crossed the street and paced slowly up and down. The height of the wall proved an effectual barrier and I could not see into Reade's garden. Disappointed, I was about to move on, when I noticed a woman watching me from a first-floor iron balcony of a narrow brick house by which I had casually stopped.

A printed sign bearing the legend: "Rooms," decorated one of the windows. As I looked from the sign to the woman I saw that she lay in an invalid's chair. On impulse, I approached her and lifted my hat.

"Have you a clear view there of the Reade garden?" I asked.

A flash of interest lightened her white, emaciated face. "You are interested in the murder?" I nodded and she smiled, well pleased at her acumen. "I have noticed you," she went on, and her pleasant voice held a plaintive note, "and the others. Oh," and she leaned over the balcony rail, "you must save Claire Fechet."

"You know her?"

She nodded. "She and Miss de Peyster bring me flowers, so kindly, from the garden over there."

I stepped on a projecting support of the balcony, so as to be closer to her. "Can you see into the garden?"

"Yes."

"And do you sit here often?"

"In fair weather, always. . . ."

"And this early in the morning?"

"If I cannot sleep, yes." Her eyes were sparkling. She stretched out her hand and touched me, timidly. "I was here yesterday—between seven and eight o'clock."

"Did you see Miss Fechet enter the Reade mansion?"

"No." My heart throbbed high at her positive and unhesitating response.

"Did Miss de Peyster enter the house?"

"Not by the front door!" She spoke with con-

viction. "Only Mister Charlie, the postman, walked up those steps; I'll swear to that sir, anywhere."

I pulled myself up to her side, caring nothing for appearances.

"Did you see any one cross the garden and enter Reade's house by the garden door?"

"I never looked that way." She read my disappointment and her eyes filled with tears. "My chair was turned a bit, and I could only face the street entrance. I saw Doyle, the policeman, come down the street and wait by the hydrant and Mister Charlie joined him and they went off together." The exertion of talking wearied her perceptibly and she sat back, panting. "My name's Hawkins—Amelia Hawkins, should you wish to call on me to testify."

"Thanks." I dropped back to the pavement, paused to wave my hand to her, then, with a feeling of elation, I crossed the street to the Alamo. Learning from the operator at the switchboard that no phone calls had come for me, I left the building, first giving Reade's phone number in case of emergency. My rapid walk slackened as I drew closer to the mansion and finally I stopped altogether. Could Miss Amelia Hawkins be relied upon? Or was it a morbid desire to figure in a murder mystery which had prompted her confidences to me, a complete stranger? Were her statements but the feverish imaginings of an ill woman—for ill she unquestionably was.

Still in doubt, I glanced across the street. Miss Hawkins and her invalid chair no longer occupied the

iron balcony; the window was closed and the shades drawn. Turning from the curb, I stubbed my toe against the hydrant and straightened up, conscious of the ridiculous figure I had cut in my endeavor to keep from sprawling on the pavement. No one was in sight —but was there some one in the vestibule of the Reade mansion? I looked through the partly open vestibule door—then looked again and laughed. The next minute I walked up the short flight of steps and into the vestibule—to find the front door open and Patrolman Doyle talking with Sergeant Meade. They both greeted me pleasantly.

"Carry my message to Miss de Peyster, Doyle," directed the finger-print expert. "And hurry back." He hooked his arm in mine. "The inspector's in the living room, Mr. Burton; come on in at once," and his tone was urgent.

Refreshed by his hours of sleep, Warfield looked younger, brighter—or was it the scent of battle that lent keenness to his eyes and gave him a healthier color?

"Bad news, Mr. Burton." I stopped, startled, as the inspector put down the cradle phone. "There's been a frightful marine disaster—"

"Not my sister's steamer?"

"No. I'm sorry if I thoughtlessly alarmed you." Warfield spoke with quick contrition. "The radio company just notified you—I took the message—that the Government had ordered the sending or receiving of private messages discontinued so as to clear the air

channels for S O S calls. Therefore up to this time, no answer has come from your sister."

Too disgusted for comment, I walked over to the garden door. At my low hail Warfield joined me there.

"Will the front-door key unlock this, too?" and I laid my hand on the door.

Warfield picked up the key he had taken from Andy Grymes and fitted it into the lock, first removing the one that belonged there.

"It doesn't even turn the lock." The inspector withdrew it and compared the two keys. "They are totally dissimilar, Mr. Burton; see for yourself."

Another theory exploded, I turned back into the room. "Can I have the 'Becky' letter?" and I wondered faintly at his immediate and silent acquiescence. That there was something on his mind, I had no doubt, judging from his whispered conference with the finger-print expert. With the letter once more in hand, I carried it over to a window. A storm was brewing, for dark clouds hovered overhead and the rumbling of distant thunder sounded with increasing clearness and greater frequency.

My perusal of Becky's letter was destined to be brief, for glancing through the window I beheld a small procession trooping along the garden path leading from Studio House. Patrolman Doyle stalked ahead and behind him came Claire and Christine, with Norah bringing up the rear. Inspector Warfield was at the door to meet them.

"So good of you!" His banal words went unanswered as Christine came in, followed by her companions. They ranged themselves stiffly in the center of the room, only Norah permitting herself a timid look about, which finally rested on me with a look of inquiry but no outward sign of recognition.

"You are good to accede to my request." In no whit discouraged by the chilly reception of his greeting, Warfield tried again to open the conversation on a friendly basis. "Certain facts have come to light—ah, who's here?" And he looked at Dr. Wyant in astonishment as the latter preceded Sergeant Meade through the secretary's office.

"Dr. Wyant came at my telephoned request." Christine spoke with decision. "Miss Fechet and I deem it advisable to have a witness present when conversing with you." The arrogance of her air reddened Warfield's cheeks and he bit his lip to keep back an angry retort.

"As you wish"—his shrug suggested indifference. "Sit down, all of you."

"We prefer to stand." Again Christine was the spokesman. "Please hurry, Inspector; our breakfast will be cold."

"Mine also waits." Warfield smiled at her in perfect good humor, but the look he turned on Claire was stern and unbending. "Have you brought the signet ring you picked up in the next room on Monday morning, and claimed as your father's?"

White to the lips, Claire threw back her head with a

defiant gesture. "I considered your request lacking in authority," she announced in level tones. "And therefore I have not complied with it."

"The Grand Jury will not be so patient," Warfield warned quietly. "And, Miss Fechet, it is easier to be interrogated by me than by the District Attorney."

"I am willing to risk the experiment"—coldly.

"And having your person searched?"—Warfield smiled a bit cruelly as he saw her flinch. It was more than I could stand.

"Claire"—I broke without ceremony into the small circle. "You knew, as we know now, that there are two of these signet rings in existence; one owned by Joe Reade, the other given by his uncle, Alfred Reade, to Miss de Peyster. Which signet ring did you *think* you picked up here within a few minutes after Alfred Reade was murdered?"

But Claire's self-possession equaled, if it did not exceed, my own, and silence was my only answer. Swiftly I changed my tactics.

"Shall I hazard a guess?" My taunting tone stained her cheeks a fiery red. "You saw that ring in Miss de Peyster's possession on Sunday—you found it here on Monday morning. Your chivalrous impulse was to shield your friend and so you—lied."

Claire's breath quickened. "Miss de Peyster needs no defender—"

"Not when she can speak for herself"—Christine turned and confronted me in blazing wrath. "Your insulting insinuations are not supported by facts, Mr.

Burton. The key to this house was sent to Miss Fechet."

"With instructions that it be given to her only, and especially not to you," I retorted swiftly. "Why did your future husband fear you?"

"Why should I have killed him?" she countered instantly; "for that is what you mean—why mince words?" Her scorn cut like a whiplash. "What motive dare you ascribe for such a deed on my part?"

Was Christine bluffing? If so, she was a magnificent actress; her bearing, her expression proclaimed outraged innocence. My eyes shifted to Claire, standing appalled—had her impassioned defense of her friend precipitated all that she had tried to avoid?

Reckless of consequences, I plunged blindly ahead. "Miss de Peyster, have you the ring Alfred Reade gave you?" I demanded.

"Certainly"—and to my infinite surprise she took from her beaded bag a signet ring and dropped it in my extended palm.

"Was this ring returned to you by Miss Fechet?"

"It was not." Christine's forceful declaration bore the stamp of truth. Suddenly a smile touched her lips but her eyes never lost their alert watchfulness. "By claiming I lost this ring here, Mr. Burton, you endow me with the power of projecting my substantial body through the keyhole—lacking a key to enter."

I started, and turned instinctively to Claire. Would she release me from my promise to tell no one that she had left Reade's house key on the hall table in Chris-

tine's house? Claire met my mute question with as much expression as a frozen image.

Borrowing Warfield's magnifying glass, I examined the ring; then gave both to the inspector.

"You mistake me, Miss de Peyster." I smiled at Reade's "Beautiful White Devil,"—at last I could afford to. "I do not claim you lost *this* ring here, but the one given you by the murdered man."

"I don't understand—" Shaken out of herself, Christine faltered. "This ring—"

"Has Joe Reade's initials engraved on the gold band and the date it was presented to him." I waited to let my words sink in. "Did you steal—"

"Have done with this foolery!" Wyant's voice rang through the room. "I gave Christine Joe's ring on Monday when she declared Reade's signet ring was mysteriously missing. I had gone to Studio House to break the news of his murder." The surgeon turned impulsively to Warfield. "Oh, I lied shamelessly last night, but"—he faltered slightly—"to protect the woman I love," he looked anywhere but at Christine, "I am willing to go to any lengths."

"Tom!" I did not recognize Christine's voice at first, so broken it was—so charged with passion.

Unheeding her interruption, Wyant went steadily on. "In a spirit of arrogant bravado, Reade boasted at dinner on Friday night that he would apply for a marriage license the next day and, no matter whose name was upon it, that woman would marry him. I took up the wager." He turned his agonized eyes on

Christine. "No woman's name was mentioned then, and not until she told me Monday, did I realize that Christine was the subject of the wager." He stopped, exhausted by emotion. "Claire, did you take Reade's signet ring from Studio House?"

"'Twas me, meself!" The declaration came from Norah. "I found the ring lyin' a-top the buffet an' thought Misther Reade had left it by misthake; so, seein' Miss Claire lay the key to his house on the tray in the hall, I ups an' takes both Misther Reade's ring an' his key an' laves the ring here on me time off on Sunday night."

"Sunday night?" Struck by Warfield's peculiar tone as he addressed Norah, I regarded him earnestly. "Sunday night—not Monday morning, very early?"

"Sure an' I'm sure!" Norah's hot Irish temper took instant note of his challenging tone. "Do ye think that me, a respectable widdy loidy, would lie?"

"You have a child—a daughter?" Warfield's lightning shift of the conversation confused the Irishwoman, as evidenced by her change of color. "Yes; a slip of a colleen—"

A blinding flash of lightning and a crash of thunder that shook the house was our first warning that the threatening storm had broken in all its fury; it also drowned Warfield's next question, combined with the imperative ting-a-ling of the 'phone bell. I was nearest to it and snatched the receiver from the hook.

"Yes, yes," I called into the mouthpiece. "Yes, this

is Guy Burton; you have a wireless—yes—what is it? Speak louder . . . the connection's poor."

"The message"—I strained my ears to hear the operator—". . . art student—my protégé—Rebecca. . . ."

Facing the windows, I saw a ball of fire drop from the heavens—the house shook on its foundations and pandemonium broke loose.

"A telephone pole was struck just outside." Warfield's voice sounded miles away as I rose dizzily to my feet. "Did it put your 'phone out of commission, Mr. Burton?"

"It's as dead as Reade—" I threw the worthless instrument to one side and looked to see what had become of my companions. Claire and Christine, clinging together, sat as far from the windows as possible; Norah, equally desirous of attaining distance, was crouched against the stone chimney; close by her stood Sergeant Meade, a sheaf of finger-print identification cards in his hand. Raised voices, coming closer, stopped Meade as he laid his hand on the shoulder of the terrified Irishwoman.

"Come in, Charlie; here's Mr. Burton himself." Patrolman Doyle, however, edged back out of the room at the scene that met his eyes, and it was Charlie Todd alone who came up to me.

"A registered letter, Mr. Burton." The policeman tossed back his rubber cape, from which water dripped in pools. I took the rain-soaked return card and scrawled my initials on it, my attention centered on the

envelope bearing my sister's handwriting. "A frightful storm," went on Todd in answer to Warfield's question. "Flooded a culvert down at the corner—" His fingers, groping for the signed return card, closed over the paper I handed to him; it crinkled in his grasp and Todd looked down—transfixed.

"Becky's letter!" His sibilant whisper contained horror unspeakable. "Good God!"

CHAPTER XXII

Retribution

I KILLED Reade." Todd spoke to no one in particular as we gather about him. "Killed him as quick as I would a poisonous snake in our Virginia hill country. Becky's just turned sixteen and pretty as a picture. She came home a week ago, after winning an award from the Corcoran Gallery School, where, thanks to Mrs. Martin's generosity, she'd gone for instruction. But Becky wasn't happy and Sunday night she told me—" Todd turned his face away.

Claire, betraying more emotion than when she had been the target of suspicion, crossed over to the postman and slipped her hand in his.

"She told me of meeting Alfred Reade at some art center, of his attentions"—again Todd paused, overcome temporarily. "Becky was raised in the country with poor folks, but honest, and she trusted Reade—too much." Another pause in his halting confession, but none of us tried to hurry him.

"That night I motored the eighty miles to Washington and reported for duty as usual Monday morning. My morning route takes me by Studio House before I come here and I saw an automatic pistol lying on the hall table there, within reach through the open window.

I took it." The postman spoke more and more slowly.

"Reade answered my ring and, under pretense of having no pencil, I followed him in here. As he signed the return receipt card for the registered letter, I pleaded with him to do the right thing by Becky." Todd's eyes burned with living fire as he re-acted the scene.

"Cool, unmoved, Reade sat back and opened one of his letters; then I saw him start and look hard at the paper in his hand. Suddenly he turned the paper 'round and told me to read my answer there. I crouched down to read it better—it was his marriage license to marry another woman." Todd moistened his dry lips. "I reached for the pistol and shot him dead."

In the utter quiet the postman straightened up and glanced at his daughter's pitiful letter to Alfred Reade. His strong fingers tore the paper to bits and no man moved to stop him.

"I didn't see how Miss Fechet could be held by the Grand Jury," he went on, and released Claire's hand, as she faced him, her eyes blinded by tears. "I'll go quietly, Inspector"—holding out his wrist for the handcuffs.

In the front hall, after the police patrol had driven off, Warfield joined me and shook hands heartily.

"You pulled the trick, Mr. Burton," he acknowledged. "But what led you to suspect Todd?"

"There were just two people who admitted coming here Monday morning—Claire Fechet and Charlie Todd," I pointed out slowly. "I was ready to stake

my life it wasn't Claire, but Todd had a cast-iron alibi in Patrolman Doyle's sworn statement that he stood and watched the postman deliver the mail to Reade at the front door."

"That threw me off the track," admitted Warfield. "Go on, sir."

"Last night when Doyle compared his watch with the clock, I noticed his sight wasn't so good; this morning, I saw him slip in stepping off the curb, apparently not seeing it." I paused to take breath and Warfield waited patiently.

"Then the invalid across the street, Miss Hawkins, declared she saw no one go up the steps but Todd. She pointed out the spot where Doyle had waited for the postman. I stood in the same spot and looked up at Reade's vestibule through the partly open door—the light and shadows on the gray and brown tiles made it appear that a man with a pack on his back stood there; the optical illusion was sufficiently clear to fool any one so nearsighted as Doyle."

My words were overheard by the white-faced patrolman. "I'm due for a Retiring Board," Doyle confessed; "but I hoped for the sake of the missus and the kiddies I could stick it out a bit longer and get the pension for thirty years' service on the force."

The opening and closing of a door in the distance carried me hurriedly into the living room, to find its only occupant was Sergeant Meade busily engaged in gathering together his papers and camera.

"Where are the ladies?" And saving of words, the

sergeant pointed to the garden door, through which I departed instantly.

The storm was over and the April sunshine again brightened the shrubs and the magnolias, falling softly on the pink and white petals which the high wind had scattered far and wide. I splashed along the sodden path heedless of the weather conditions under foot or overhead, but my speed slackened as I approached the gate to Studio House. Neither Claire nor Christine had waited for a word with me and to thrust myself into their presence—I stopped altogether and stood debating a problem as old as Time itself, the caprices of women.

"Misther Burton!" The gate opened and Norah, her eyes reddened by much weeping, beckoned to me. "Come in, sor; we all wishes to see ye."

Thus generously encouraged, I followed her gladly into Christine's living room—to find it empty except for ourselves.

"Sor"—Norah plucked at my coat sleeve. "I took ye gun Monday night. Indade I was afeared to sit in the room wid a man a bit daffy—excuse me, sor—and a gun handy. I hid the gun in the linen closet, thinkin' only meself would go there. By bad luck me sticky fingers lift a mark on the barrel." Norah wound up her confession in breathless confusion. "An' but for ye, that finger-man would a-thought I done the killin' o' Misther Reade."

"And but for you, I would still be under suspicion" —the soft silvery voice I had grown to long for in-

terrupted us, and the Irishwoman beat a discreet retreat. Claire came closer and laid an appealing hand on my arm as blushes mantled her soft cheeks. "I owe you so much."

"You owe me nothing"—I broke in passionately; "except—"

"An explanation?" demurely, and a mischievous twinkle was not entirely hidden behind a mist of tears as she glanced upward. "I dared not tell all that I knew or suspected for fear of involving Christine. I have no close relatives, no intimate friends in America except Christine, and she has made her house my second home." Her quivering tones testified to the depth of her devotion to the woman who had befriended her. "And so—"

"You let suspicion rest upon yourself." Her eyes fell before my ardent gaze. How fair she was, how captivating her silvery voice and adorable smile—and how recklessly forgetful of self in another's cause! "Claire, I have no words to voice my admiration—my adoration—"

"Mr. Burton." It was Christine who spoke, coming in with Wyant—his arm thrown protectingly about her—a transfigured, glorified Christine who made no attempt to disguise the love light in her eyes as they rested on the surgeon. "We have played a part, innocently, in a frightful tragedy of errors; suspecting each other, protecting each other. On Sunday, Alfred did not tell me the license was procured as the result of a wager, declaring it was his devotion to me that had

prompted him to apply for it. I—" For the first time she faltered and turned scarlet.

"Tom had not been near me and, bitterly hurt, I accepted Alfred's invitation to the theater, accepted his blandishments"— she shuddered. "Claire had warned me what manner of man he was. I—I was foolish enough to think that she spoke from jealous motives" —Christine made her confession bravely and her eyes asked forgiveness as they rested on Claire. "I saw Joe's pistol on the hall table and Alfred's house key when I returned from the theater; then, after a breakfast in bed, I found them missing and Claire gone—and Tom came and broke the news to me of the murder—just before you and Claire and Inspector Warfield—you know the rest."

"And have guessed, Burton, why I was not more cordial about your being a guest here," added Wyant. "I feared both Christine and Claire were involved and dreaded what you and Warfield might unearth."

"I understand at last." I clasped his hand warmly. "But who was in your consulting office last night when I came?"

"Miss Hawkins from across the street." He smiled at my astonishment. "My patient, also."

"And Joe?" I questioned, as Christine opened one of the French doors.

"He is with Mrs. Andy in my apartment, and I hope by now they have settled their differences." Wyant paused. "Andy has confessed complicity with Wah Ling in peddling opium. Coming, dearest," and with

a friendly smile, the surgeon turned and followed the woman he had loved and won.

"So that solves the last of our problems." Claire drew a long, long breath. "Norah is serving breakfast out under the awnings. Come."

"Later"—and I captured her hand.

"But what will they think of us?"

"It's what you think of me, Claire, darling, that counts."

"Guy!" She smiled shyly up at me, her eyes dancing. "You have a persuasive tongue."

"How enchanting you are when kind!" I spoke unsteadily, my heart thumping madly; I could not bear uncertainty longer. "Why did you refuse Joe?" My question drove the color from her cheeks.

"I grew to hate my secretarial work," she admitted, speaking low. "Joe was a—a—safety valve, a protection from his uncle's unwelcome attentions. When he went away, the place grew unbearable. I put Joe's gun on the hall table, intending to return it to him after the theater Sunday night, but our—our—conversation put it and Mr. Reade's key out of my mind; for when I told Joe I planned to leave Washington, he generously asked me to marry him, fearing he had been the cause of a quarrel with his uncle. He promised never to mention the subject again, but—but—the next morning blurted it out to Inspector Warfield."

"And thereby added to my unhappiness," I exclaimed. "With me, it was love at first sight. Ah, Claire, dare I hope?"

Her eyes were downcast as I bent to catch her faltering answer.

"Why—only—hope—"

Voices called us from afar, but I paid no heed, seeing only the sweet, smiling face of the girl I loved, as she raised her lips to mine.

(1)

THE END